RUGBY WORLD®

TOM CURRY

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

"I'm just gonna throw the kitchen sink at this!"

SCOTT ROBERTSON
Next All Blacks boss on his coaching ethos

~

STUART HOGG
Life in pictures

~

MARLIE PACKER
The softer side of Red Roses captain

~

PLAYING THROUGH GRIEF
A special report

PLUS

Wales defence
Steven Kitshoff
Saracens future
Wallaby wonderkid
Glasgow Warriors

ISSUE JUNE 2023
FUTURE

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WHAT YOU SHOULD BE TALKING ABOUT THIS MONTH…

"World Cups can't keep coming back to the same countries"

Take a bow
Japan in 2019

PICS AFP & Getty Images

WE ALREADY know England will host the women's World Cup in 2025, before Australia stage the men's World Cup in 2027 and the women's in 2029. Then everything moves to the US in 2031 and 2033.

However, in recent weeks, the Japanese union has laid out plans to bring the World Cup back to their shores in time for 2035. The Italians, in slightly less detail, have made noises about 2035 and 2037 as well.

Japan 2019 was a booming success. According to financial analysts Ernst and Young, the JRFU made £259m in ticket revenues. They also estimated that around 242,000 tourists visited Japan. All told, EY reported that nearly £4.3bn was generated in economic output during the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

Italy, meanwhile, are all ambition. The union has thrown its support behind the Italian Football Federation's formal candidacy to host Euro 2032 in Italy. The upshot being that if there are upgrades across the nation for the biggest football stadia, it would help an Italian bid for Rugby World Cups down the line.

These two have plenty of goodwill behind them. But as some cynics point out, the map for World Cup hosting in recent years has seen lesser, struggling or emerging markets getting a shot, then a powerhouse, Tier One nation. So could World Rugby really go from the US to Italy, two first-time hosts in a row?

The hope is yes. World Rugby have created their EventsCo, which will take over a larger responsibility for the delivery of the events (including financing) alongside the hosts.

World Cups can't keep coming back to the same nations. Already we see pretty much the same old sides make up the event's playing roster, cycle after cycle.

So South America, anyone? Mind you, if it returns to South Africa, a collective sigh of "finally" may go up…

SCOTT ROBERTSON THIS MONTH

"You need to know who you are. As a coach I'm a great ideas man but I also need finishers, I need people to help me tell the story" **P29**

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SAVE THIS MONTH

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DON'T MISS THIS MONTH

In a special report this month, we look at tales of loss and grief as we explore the human side of the elite game

COVER PIC Phil Barker. **PICS** Getty Images & Inpho

Loving the quarters
Chiefs have enjoyed Europe

EDITOR'S LETTER

Finals rugby in May makes you forget the rest

IT'S NOT quite a case of getting the embroiderer on speed dial and buying a whack of red baseball caps. Because while we'd love to 'Make Europe Great Again', there is no denying that semis and finals time is fun as hell. The same goes for the Premiership run-in, through May.

As the sun is finally coaxed out from behind some clouds and we get to see some tense yet gripping winner-takes-all rugby, it's hard to top these weekends.

Seeing Sale Sharks roar through in the Premiership has been great and Tom Curry speaks well on their run (P32). But we've had weeks of amusement. Sarries. Glasgow. Chiefs in Europe's quarters.

Now is a good time to celebrate the best of what we've seen on the club scene. Because soon enough, we'll be all about the Rugby World Cup… Enjoy it in the sun, with your *Rugby World*.

Alan Dymock

Alan Dymock, Editor
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SCAN TO GET RUGBY WORLD'S NEWSLETTER

Elevator pitch

France full-back Thomas Ramos scores with a theatrical dive during Toulouse's 54-20 Champions Cup win against the Sharks

Picture **Lionel Hahn of Getty Images**

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GO. COMPARE

YOUR RUGBY CALENDAR

A look at the oval-ball events taking place in May

25th

England coach Kevin Sinfield's autobiography *The Extra Mile* is released this Thursday. Read all about the rugby league superstar's illustrious career and his heroic pursuit to raise money for motor neurone disease in honour of his pal Rob Burrow.

13th

The third and final round of the Inter-Services Championship sees the Army and Navy do battle at Twickenham for the Babcock Trophy. The men kick off at 2pm with the women's fixture following at 5pm. The Army, with England's Semesa Rokoduguni on the wing for the men, won both matches last year.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13 🏉	14
15	16	17	18	19	20 🌐	21
22	23	24	25 📖	26 🎟	27 🏆	28
29	30th NEW ISSUE OUT	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	

20th

The HSBC London Sevens take place at Twickenham this weekend with Australia looking to reclaim the men's crown they won last year by beating New Zealand in the final. More than 72,000 spectators attended the event in 2022 and even more are expected for this year's disco theme.

26th

The Bournemouth 7s Festival, coined the 'sporting Glastonbury', takes place over the Bank Holiday weekend. Elite and social sevens and tens competitions, as well as touch rugby, are on offer for men and women on the south coast.

27th

The winners of the 2022-23 Gallagher Premiership season will be crowned in the final at Twickenham. Saracens lost out to Leicester Tigers in last year's epic after Freddie Burns's dramatic late drop-goal. Will there be another thrilling finale to the campaign?

THE DIRECTORY

All the dates and TV details you need as some major competitions reach a climax

SATURDAY 29 APRIL

Women's Six Nations

England v France
(1pm, Twickenham)
Italy v Wales (3.30pm,
Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi)
TV Both Live on BBC & RTÈ
Scotland v Ireland
(7.30pm, DAM Health Stadium)
TV Live on BBC & Virgin Media

Champions Cup semi-final

Leinster v Toulouse
(3pm, Aviva Stadium)
TV Live on ITV, BT Sport & RTÈ

Challenge Cup semi-final

Scarlets v Glasgow (5.30pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & S4C

Super Rugby Pacific

Drua v Blues (3.05am)
Moana v Rebels (5.35am)
Chiefs v Crusaders (8.05am)
Reds v Force (10.35am)

Rugby Europe Conf 1 North

Latvia v Czechia (noon)

Rugby Europe Conf 1 South

Bulgaria v Slovenia
Israel v Malta

Rugby Europe Conf 2 North

Andorra v Norway

Rugby Europe Conf 2 South

Bosnia & Herzegovina v Serbia

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

Boroughmuir v Heriot's (3pm)
Southern Knights v Ayrshire (5)

Indigo Group Premiership

Newport v Llanelli (2.30pm)
RGC v Swansea (2.30pm)

RFU Championship

Doncaster v Ealing (2.30pm)
Bedford v Coventry (3pm)
Hartpury Uni v Caldy (3pm)
Jersey v Ampthill (3pm)
Richmond v Cornish Pirates (3pm)

SAT 29-SUN 30 APRIL

Sevens Tournament

Kinsale 7s (County Cork)

SUNDAY 30 APRIL

Champions Cup semi-final

La Rochelle v Exeter Chiefs
(3pm, Bordeaux)
TV Live on BT Sport

Challenge Cup semi-final

Toulon v Benetton (12.30pm)
TV Live on BT Sport & France TV

FRIDAY 5 MAY

Super Rugby Pacific

Highlanders v Chiefs (8.05am)

SAT 6-SUN 7 MAY

Top 14

Clermont v Stade Français
Lyon v Perpignan
Montpellier v Brive
Pau v Castres
Racing 92 v Bayonne
Toulon v La Rochelle
Toulouse v Bordeaux-Bègles

SATURDAY 6 MAY

Gallagher Premiership

Bath v Saracens (4pm)
Bristol v Gloucester (4pm)
Leicester v Harlequins (4pm)
London Irish v Exeter (4pm)
Sale v Newcastle (4pm)

United Rugby Championship

Quarter-finals

Super Rugby Pacific

Drua v Hurricanes (3.05am)
Crusaders v Force (5.35am)
Blues v Moana (8.05am)
Reds v Waratahs (10.35am)

Rugby Europe Conf 1 North

Hungary v Latvia

Indigo Group Premiership

Newport v Llandovery (2.30pm)

SUNDAY 7 MAY

Super Rugby Pacific

Rebels v Brumbies (5.35am)

WEEKEND 12-14 MAY

Men's Sevens World Series

Women's Sevens World Series

Toulouse, France

FRIDAY 12 MAY

Super Rugby Pacific

Chiefs v Reds (8.05am)
Force v Drua (10.35am)

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

Boroughmuir v Watsonians (7.35)

SAT 13-SUN 14 MAY

Gallagher Premiership

Semi-finals
TV Live on BT Sport

Top 14

Bayonne v Clermont
Bordeaux-Bègles v Pau
Brive v Castres
Montpellier v La Rochelle
Perpignan v Toulouse
Racing 92 v Toulon
Stade Français v Lyon

SATURDAY 13 MAY

United Rugby Championship

Semi-finals

Allianz Premier 15s

Sale Sharks v Bristol (2pm)
Harlequins v Wasps (3pm)
Worcester v DMP Sharks (3pm)

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

Stirling v Southern Knights (3pm)
Ayrshire Bulls v Heriot's (5pm)

Super Rugby Pacific

Hurricanes v Moana (5.35am)
Crusaders v Blues (8.05am)
Waratahs v Rebels (10.35am)

Men's Inter-Services

Army v Navy
(2pm, Twickenham)

Women's Inter-Services

Army v Navy
(5pm, Twickenham)

Rugby Europe Conf 1 South

Cyprus v Bulgaria

Rugby Europe Conf 2 North

Norway v Denmark

Rugby Europe Conf 2 South

Montenegro v Turkey

SUNDAY 14 MAY

Allianz Premier 15s

Saracens v Exeter (2.30pm)
Loughborough v Gloucester (3)

Super Rugby Pacific

Brumbies v Highlanders (5.35am)

FRIDAY 19 MAY

Challenge Cup final

(8pm, Aviva Stadium, Dublin)
TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby Pacific

Moana v Crusaders (8.05am)
Reds v Blues (10.35am)

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

Ayrshire Bulls v Watsonians (7.35)

SAT 20-SUN 21 MAY

Men's Sevens World Series

Twickenham, London

SATURDAY 20 MAY

Champions Cup final

(4.45pm, Aviva Stadium, Dublin)
TV Live on BT Sport

Women's International

Australia v Fiji (Allianz Stadium)

Allianz Premier 15s

Bristol Bears v Exeter (1pm)
DMP Sharks v Loughborough (2)
Worcester Warriors v Saracens (2)
Wasps v Sale Sharks (2.30pm)

Super Rugby Pacific

Highlanders v Rebels (5.35am)
Chiefs v Hurricanes (8.05am)
Waratahs v Drua (10.35am)
Force v Brumbies (1pm)

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

Heriot's v Stirling Wolves (3pm)
S'thern Knights v Boroughmuir (5)

SUNDAY 21 MAY

Allianz Premier 15s

Gloucester v Harlequins (2.30pm)

FRI 26-SUN 28 MAY

Sevens Tournament

Bournemouth Sevens
(University Sports Campus)

FRIDAY 26 MAY

Super Rugby Pacific

Highlanders v Reds (8.05am)
Rebels v Force (10.35am)

FOSROC Super Sprint Series

1st v 2nd play-off (7.35pm)

SATURDAY 27 MAY

Gallagher Premiership final

(3pm, Twickenham)
TV Live on ITV & BT Sport

United Rugby Championship

Grand final

Allianz Premier 15s

Exeter Chiefs v Wasps (1pm)
Loughborough v Worcester (2pm)
Sale Sharks v Gloucester (2pm)

Super Rugby Pacific

Drua v Moana (3.05am)
Crusaders v Waratahs (5.35am)
Blues v Hurricanes (8.05am)
Brumbies v Chiefs (10.35am)

FROM THE GROUND UP
FROM THE GROUND UP
LEINSTER RUGBY
#JOINTHERDAR

20th

THEATRE OF DREAMS

The Aviva Stadium will host the Heineken Champions Cup final – kick-off in Dublin is 4.45pm

PICS CameraSport & Sportsfile/Getty Images

21st

PLAY-OFF BATTLE

Gloucester-Hartpury and Harlequins fight for crucial points as the Allianz Premier 15s nears its conclusion

Rugby Europe Women's Trophy
Finland v Belgium
FOSROC Super Sprint Series
5th v 6th play-off (3pm)
3rd v 4th play-off (5pm)

SUNDAY 28 MAY

International
Barbarians v World XV
(2pm, Twickenham)
Allianz Premier 15s
Harlequins v DMP Sharks (1pm)
Saracens v Bristol Bears (2.30pm)
Top 14
Castres v Perpignan
Clermont v Racing 92
La Rochelle v Stade Français
Lyon v Bayonne
Pau v Montpellier
Toulon v Bordeaux-Bègles
Toulouse v Brive

FRI 2-SUN 4 JUNE

Sevens Tournament
Amsterdam 7s
(Sportpark de Eendracht)

FRIDAY 2 JUNE

Super Rugby Pacific
Blues v Highlanders (8.05am)
Brumbies v Rebels (10.35am)

SATURDAY 3 JUNE

Allianz Premier 15s
DMP Sharks v Sale Sharks
Gloucester-Hartpury v Exeter
Loughborough v Saracens
Wasps v Bristol Bears
Worcester Warriors v Harlequins
Top 14 Play-off
Super Rugby Pacific
Drua v Reds (5.35am)
Hurricanes v Crusaders (8.05am)
Waratahs v Moana (10.35am)
Force v Chiefs (1pm)

SUNDAY 4 JUNE

Top 14 Play-off

FRI 9-SAT 10 JUNE

Sevens Tournament
Macclesfield 7s

FRI 9-MON 12 JUNE

Sevens Tournament
International Algarve Sevens
(Vila Real de Santo Stadium)

FRIDAY 9 JUNE

Top 14 Play-off

SAT 10-SUN 11 JUNE

Allianz Premier 15s
Semi-finals

SATURDAY 10 JUNE

Top 14 Play-off

FRIDAY 16 JUNE

Women's Touch Rugby Tournament
(6pm, Tynedale RFC)

SATURDAY 17 JUNE

Top 14 final (Stade de France)

SAT 17-SUN 18 JUNE

Sevens Tournament
Edinburgh City 7s
(Peppermill Playing Fields)

THU 22-SUN 25 JUNE

Sevens Tournament
Gibraltar 7s (Europa Sports Park)

SATURDAY 24 JUNE

Allianz Premier 15s final
(3.30pm, Kingsholm)
TV Live on BBC & BT Sport
U20 World Cup
Argentina v Italy (10am, Paarl)
England v Ireland (12.30, Paarl)
France v Japan (1, Stellenbosch)
Wales v New Zealand (3, Paarl)
Australia v Fiji (3.30, Stellenbosch)
South Africa v Georgia
(6pm, Stellenbosch)

SUN 25-TUE 27 JUNE

European Games Rugby Sevens
(Henryk Reyman Stad, Krakow)

THURSDAY 29 JUNE

U20 World Cup
Australia v Ireland (10am, Paarl)
France v New Zealand
(12.30pm, Paarl)
Wales v Japan (1, Stellenbosch)
South Africa v Italy (3pm, Paarl)
Argentina v Georgia
(3.30pm, Stellenbosch)
England v Fiji (6pm, Stellenbosch)
Pacific Four Series
Australia v New Zealand

TUESDAY 4 JULY

U20 World Cup
Italy v Georgia (10am, Paarl)
Ireland v Fiji (12.30pm, Paarl)
Australia v England (1, Wellington)
New Zealand v Japan (3, Paarl)
France v Wales (3.30, Wellington)
South Africa v Argentina
(6pm, Wellington)

SATURDAY 8 JULY

Rugby Championship
South Africa v Australia (Pretoria)
Argentina v N Zealand (Mendoza)
Sevens Tournaments
LIT Sevens (Wasps RFC, London)
National Pub 7s & Hen 7s
(Harpenden RFC)

SUNDAY 9 JULY

U20 World Cup
Seeds 10 v 11 (1pm, Wellington)
Seeds 5 v 8 (1pm, Stellenbosch)
Seeds 2 v 3 (3.30, Stellenbosch)
Seeds 9 v 12 (3.30pm, Wellington)
Seeds 6 v 7 (6pm, Wellington)
Seeds 1 v 4 (6pm, Stellenbosch)

FRI 14-SUN 16 JULY

Sevens Tournament
Fat Blokes 7s (Abbey RFC)

FRIDAY 14 JULY

U20 World Cup
Final (6pm, Stellenbosch)
Rankings matches (11am-4pm,
Wellington and Stellenbosch)

SATURDAY 15 JULY

Rugby Championship
N Zealand v S Africa (Auckland)
Australia v Argentina (Sydney)
U20 World Trophy
All matches in Nairobi, Kenya
Scotland v Africa 2
Uruguay v Canada/USA
Samoa v Kenya
Spain v Hong Kong

THURSDAY 20 JULY

U20 World Trophy
Samoa v Hong Kong
Scotland v Canada/USA
Uruguay v Africa 2
Spain v Kenya

SAT 22-SUN 23 JULY

Sevens Tournament
South Island 7s, Isle of Wight

SATURDAY 22 JULY

Men's International
Japan v Samoa (Sapporo Dome)
Sevens Tournament
Nuneaton RFC U18 7s

TUESDAY 25 JULY

U20 World Trophy
Canada/USA v Africa 2
Spain v Samoa
Kenya v Hong Kong
Scotland v Uruguay

SATURDAY 29 JULY

Rugby Championship
Australia v N Zealand (Melbourne)
South Africa v Argentina (J'burg)
Men's Internationals
Japan v Tonga (Hanazono Stad)
Scotland v Italy (Murrayfield)

SUNDAY 30 JULY

U20 World Trophy
Final and rankings matches

SATURDAY 5 AUGUST

Men's Internationals
Argentina v South Africa
Ireland v Italy
Japan v Fiji
Romania v USA
Scotland v France
Wales v England

SATURDAY 12 AUGUST

Men's Internationals
England v Wales
France v Scotland
Georgia v Romania

SATURDAY 19 AUGUST

Men's Internationals
Ireland v England
Italy v Romania
Wales v South Africa

FRIDAY 25 AUGUST

Men's International
New Zealand v South Africa
(7.30pm, Twickenham)

SATURDAY 26 AUGUST

Men's Internationals
England v Fiji
Italy v Japan
Scotland v Georgia
Spain v Argentina

MON 28-THU 31 AUGUST

Sevens Tournament
European Universities Sevens
Championship (Lisbon)

● *All kick-offs UK & Ireland. Fixtures subject to change.*

DOWNTIME WITH... **FIN SMITH**

"For a long period I was just known as the kid who Dan Biggar spoke to"

The Northampton Saints fly-half talks bacon milkshakes, Bentleys and bravery

Interview **Josh Graham** // Pictures **Getty Images**

WHAT'S THE funniest thing you've seen or heard on the pitch? We were defending and one of my team-mates at Worcester, hooker Isaac Miller, was calling out one of the opposition and had a pretty horrendous voice break while he did it. He then got sat down horribly in the tackle which was quite funny. A pretty poor ten seconds.

Any phobias? I don't really like rats.

What really annoys you? People who are quite judgemental seem to annoy me; judgy people get on my nerves.

If your house was on fire, what one item would you save? It would probably be my phone, I'm pretty addicted to it unfortunately. I've been trying to learn how to play chess on it as well. I've figured out the rules and got a nice little opening strategy, but I'm not too handy.

What's the best thing you've ever bought? My best investment recently was my air fryer. I get a good amount of use out of that. It's a life-changer. I do everything in there but my go-to is chicken and home-made chips with some broccoli. Beautiful.

And the silliest thing you've bought? I bought a nice expensive pair of tracksuit bottoms when I was out in Italy with the England U20s last summer, which I still regret to this day. I get pretty hammered by everyone whenever I wear them. I like baggy clothes but they are extremely baggy.

What would be your *Mastermind* specialist subject? Aston Villa from 2015 to the present day.

What's the best present you've ever received? I quite like a 'doing' present. I had a good night out in London with my girlfriend and we stayed in The Shard hotel looking out over the city, which was really cool.

Who would be your three dream dinner party guests? Definitely Kanye West, I'm a big fan of his music. I'd probably go for someone like Margot Robbie and then Conor McGregor as well for entertainment.

What's your guilty pleasure? I love milkshakes. My favourite is Oreo with salted caramel and at Five Guys you can get little bits of crispy bacon in them. It gives it a nice salty texture. I was a cynic at first but it's so good.

Any surprising hidden talents? I got to grade seven on the trumpet at school.

FACT FILE

Age 20 (11 May 2002)
Born Warwick
Position Fly-half
Club Northampton
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 13st 10lb
Instagram @finsmithh

WHAT'S ON YOUR PHONE

Last person you phoned
My mum, she was asking what I want for my 21st

Last photo you took
On a night out at home in Leamington Spa

Last person you texted
My missus, Gracie

Guilty pleasure app
Instagram

Last app downloaded
Chess.com

On the ball
Smith distributing

Good life
Courtney Lawes

> **“I’ve figured out the rules of chess and got a nice opening strategy, but I’m not too handy”**

What was the first job you ever had? I worked at a garden centre carrying compost bags to people’s cars and coached kids at Rugbytots.

If you could be one team-mate, who would it be and why? Courtney Lawes, so I could drive around in his Bentley. He’s had a pretty good life.

What’s your most embarrassing moment? Getting kegged (shorts pulled down) fully on the pitch, bum out and everything. I just managed to save the front side. I think it was one of my first games for Worcester. I was a young, pretty nervous child anyway, so that was not a good start.

If you could have one superpower, what would it be? I would like to be able to read people’s minds and know what they are thinking.

Who would you like to be stuck in a lift with? (Saints team-mate) Ethan Waller, he’s full of good stories and he does a very good French Horn impression.

What’s the most memorable headline (good or bad) you’ve seen about yourself? There was a long period where I was just known as the kid who Dan Biggar spoke to (after the pair were filmed chatting following Worcester’s 66-10 defeat away to Northampton in 2021). I’m hoping I’m just about past that now.

What’s the best practical joke that you’ve witnessed? I quite enjoy Paul Hill when one of the coaches walks into the room, he’ll go, “Oh go on, do that impression of him you were just doing” or “Tell him what you were just saying about him.” I enjoy seeing players squirm as that happens.

Best book you’ve read? I enjoyed the Harry Potters but I’m not a big reader.

What would you like to achieve outside of rugby? Hopefully one day I will have a nice family. And I’m doing economics and maths at the Open University, so maybe something financial afterwards.

How would you like to be remembered? Hopefully as a good player and a good guy! I like the idea of being described as brave and tough and I would like people to think I always had time for them.

Future goals? To play for England one day and win the Prem with Saints. RW

Favourite WhatsApp group
One with all my school mates called ‘Boysies’

Last song you played
Higher by Tems

Favourite social network
TikTok

1
6
5
10
9
2
3
8
7
4

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images & RAN**

AROUND THE WORLD IN TEN STORIES

We take you on a whistle-stop tour of the global game

1

Ireland

Players at the men's and women's Six Nations U18 festivals have taken a collective stance against doping in rugby. 'Keep Rugby Clean' T-shirts were on display in the warm-ups at Energia Park in Dublin at the men's event (below, France's Thibaut Motassi scores against England) and the day before at Wellington College, in Berkshire, during match-day two of the women's festival.

2

Cuba

Rugby Americas North have announced the inclusion of Federación Cubana De Rugby (FCR) as RAN's newest Associate Member. RAN president George Nicholson said: "Cuba has always been one of the athletic powerhouses in the Caribbean, so they were an obvious target as we sought to grow the game in our region."

Rugby first took root in Cuba back in 1992 at Havana University and is now played in eight provinces across the country.

3

South Africa

Charlie Ewels has joined the Bulls in the Currie Cup to get more game time and so try to press his case for a spot in England's World Cup squad.

The lock injured his knee on tour in Australia last year and had worked over the last nine months with Bath's medical team towards a return to fitness. Ewels (below) said: "It's a really exciting opportunity to be experiencing a new country and different competition."

4

New Zealand

Sky, the New Zealand broadcast rights holder for this year's Rugby World Cup in France, will share free-to-air coverage of the tournament on Prime.

As well as 48 games broadcast live on Sky Sports, 12 matches will be broadcast on free-to-air channel Prime (six matches live). Sky said that live free-to-air coverage will include a semi-final, bronze final and grand final.

Spark and TVNZ showed 14 games free-to-air during the men's World Cup in Japan in 2019, with both semi-finals and the final shown live. Prime is Sky's largest reach platform and was watched by 3,467,900 New Zealanders last year.

5

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan are in Test action on 3 and 6 May in Doha, competing in the Asia Rugby Men's Division Two Championship against India and hosts Qatar respectively. They made their way into the championship after winning Division Three Central.

6

France

World Rugby will trial the 'TMO Bunker' at this summer's U20 World Cup, ahead of possible use at the Rugby World Cup in France next autumn. For any incident where a red card is not obvious, a yellow will be shown and 'foul play' reviewers in a central bunker will review the incident as play continues.

7

Argentina

The Pumas have announced details of their final two Tests on home soil ahead of the World Cup. They face New Zealand in the Rugby Championship on 8 July at Malvinas Argentinas Stadium in Mendoza, and then South Africa in a warm-up match at Vélez Sarsfield Stadium, Buenos Aires on 5 August.

Neighbours Uruguay have also announced their warm-up fixtures ahead of the World Cup. They will play Chile, Namibia and an Argentina XV. The game against Namibia has added spice as the two nations are in the same World Cup pool.

LAST STOPS

8

Australia

The British & Irish Lions and Rugby Australia have announced a new joint venture for the 2025 tour. The aim is to bring together the two brands to work collaboratively and engage with fans more effectively.

9

USA

During his recent tour of Ireland, US president Joe Biden accidentally confused New Zealand's All Blacks with the notorious British military force known as the 'Black and Tans' during a speech at a pub in Dundalk.

10

Japan

Ex-Wallabies coach Robbie Deans tasted defeat for the first time in over four years as Saitama Panasonic Wild Knights (above) lost 44-25 to Shizuoka Blue Revs in Japan League One. It ended a 47-match winning streak.

THE SECRET REFEREE

Stop tinkering with the laws!

Our former elite official is wound up by talk of an 'orange card' coming into rugby

FOR SOME time now, World Rugby and others have been looking at changing the way a referee uses cards – and this despite an unsuccessful experiment with a white card some 20 years ago. Historically rugby, like other sports, has simply used the yellow and red card when it comes to foul play or cynical infringements.

However, in the last couple of years there have been changes afoot with the introduction of the 'orange card', mooted for use in the World Cup this year, as well as process changes to the use of existing cards, such as replacing a player after 20 minutes in the sin-bin following the use of the red card.

Let's remember, the use of a red card is seen as the ultimate sanction. The removal of a player for the remainder of the match, and thus the reduction of their team to 14 players, occurs for a reason – serious foul play. The red card is a punishment and its use in the first or last minute of a game is never taken lightly by the referee.

Critics will say that the ref sometimes gets it wrong and that the loss of a player for potentially 79 minutes is too harsh, but I don't believe this. Referees have never been better trained, never had better technology and never been better supported on the field.

There has never been more red cards than presently but this is a reaction to the important player safety issues in the game now. By reducing the impact of the red, you're reducing the emphasis on players making better on-field decisions.

Serious acts of foul play need serious consequences, not pandering to an orange card. This is an overreaction. So stop messing with the laws!

Super Rugby sin-bin Ref Angus Mabey shows a yellow

SCHOOLS ROUND UP

HARTPURY COLLEGE made an impact at the **Kearsney Easter Rugby Festival** in Durban, South Africa – the first overseas participant since New Zealand's Christ College in 2011. They began with a 28-all draw with Gauteng giants Hoërskool Dr EG Jansen, lost to Westville 14-9 and then beat Kearsney 26-24 on the final day.

Players at every level of the **Scottish community game**, including schools and youth clubs, will have to tackle lower next season as part of a new law trial. The change requires tackles to be made below the sternum. Regional roadshows, starting at Gala RFC on 10 May, will help educate people about the trial.

The RFU in England are bolstering development pathways for girls' rugby as part of their **Every Rose** strategy. More Centres of Excellence will be created, with the former Wasps centre moving to the Thames Valley and a new base being established in Kent.

JARGON BUSTER

Clutch kick

A kick of huge significance at the end of a match, such as that by Sam Prendergast (below) on his Leinster debut to defeat the Lions 39-36.

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

KEN OWENS

The Wales captain who has represented the Lions and Scarlets with distinction

"I think the scrum is in a good place at the moment"

Heat of battle
Ulster v La Rochelle

YOU'VE GOT to love a scrum.

I probably wouldn't have a job if there weren't scrums – and our game would be more like rugby league! But really, the scrum is the epitome of rugby's mission statement: to be a game for all shapes and sizes. Well, you see all sorts in the set-piece and what an identity to have. Being in there, you are part of a highly technical, but also incredibly physical, unique part of sport.

The beautiful thing is that someone could be the strongest in the gym, the biggest man, but it doesn't necessarily translate to being able to scrummage. Because it has a technique base. Now obviously it helps if you've got big men who are technically very good. Look at a lot of the South African teams, they generally are. And with that mix, it's generally a lot harder to face.

The other interesting thing is that, while within the scrum it's very confrontational – it's me versus you – you are also still right in there with your mates.

The problem you find is that in trying to make the scrum safer, which I agree with, you can risk taking it too far. Because no matter what the best intentions are with the changes you bring in, teams out there are all still working on ways to gain an advantage.

I do understand why people have discussed depowering the scrum. A few years back there was a messy period when every scrum was taking too long and there were endless resets. But I think the scrum is in a pretty good place at the moment and we're not talking about it as much as we have done in the past. And it's still a vitally important part of the game.

Because every team needs a good scrum. Even if different countries have different coaching philosophies – say, they just see the scrum as a restart to launch an attack from – you still need the scrum to be a stable platform. Having a good scrum allows you to dominate a facet of the game, but even for the teams who just want to 'get it in and get it out', you still need that stability… And not to get penalised!

Referees' understanding of scrums is getting better. If it's a fair contest and it goes up or down, if the ball is at the back and can be played, many refs now will let it go. The top referees are able to make that judgement, which I think helps the scrum and also the flow.

The biggest thing that needs to be continually addressed is the speed of set-up. It might not be about putting a clock on it but more the mindset of teams. To get it set up quick, and get stability. That doesn't mean rushing, and I've spoken to a few refs about that, to make it clear that if you allow some set-up time, chances are the binds are better, feet are solid anchors, and then it's likely fewer scrums go down and player welfare is better. We are getting through scrums a lot better now.

If we were to introduce a 'scrum ref' you have to be conscious of how it affects the tempo of the game. We have enough stoppages already. I think upskilling referees to see more pictures is probably better. Because players are aware: even if you're dominant but the loosehead's elbow is pointing down, that's a poor picture for the ref. If players understand the pictures expected of them, we can then expect the officials to interpret those with consistency.

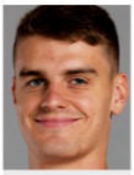
Referees look for a loosehead to have hips square and a high elbow in the bind, or the tighthead to have a long bind, or hookers to have a 'brake foot'. Well, if you deliver what they want and go forward, you should be rewarded.

Pundits should also be able to explain what's going on, regardless of what position they used to play. Even if not the technical side, it's good to hear why a side might want to get a nudge up the left to take the opposition back row out of the equation. Because the scrum isn't just 'hit and push as hard as you can'.

RISING STARS

Interviews **Josh Graham** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

1 BRYN BRADLEY



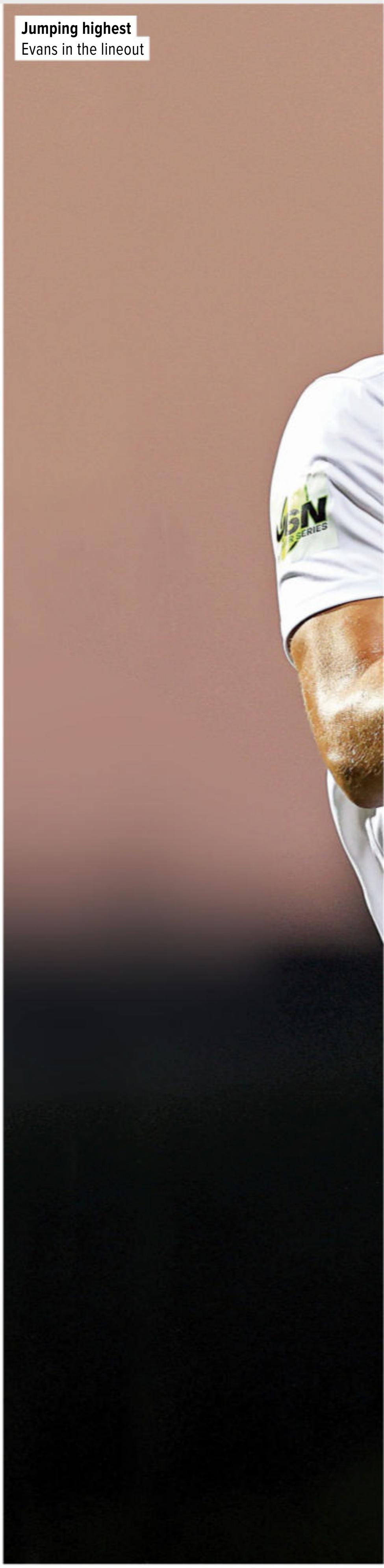
Age **20 (17 April 2003)** Born **Kingston, London** Position **Centre** Club **Harlequins** Country **Wales**

When did you first play rugby? I think it was U5 at Cobham in Surrey. My parents were both into rugby – they met at an England v Wales game! So I got straight into it from an early age with my brother.
What first attracted you to rugby? The environment, not necessarily playing but after training or finishing a mini festival, you'd have a burger and your parents would be at the bar. The tours you go on when you are young, the feel it had was just different.
Did you play other sports? I played football until 12 or 13. I was actually in the Fulham academy for about a year at nine or ten. I played rugby league at Elmbridge Eagles and London Broncos, too.
What positions have you played? I played a bit of ten when I was really young and at Hinchley Wood School, but mainly centre. I've never been a forward.
Any childhood heroes? Jamie Roberts. I watched him in the glory years with all the Grand Slams. He was always carrying hard.
How did you end up playing for Wales? I always knew I wanted to play for Wales. People find that odd as I was born in London but my mum has had me in a Welsh rugby shirt from day dot. It was a proud family moment when I finally made my U20 debut last year after Covid had disrupted the U18 year.
How would you describe your playing style? A combination of the physical side, getting over the gain-line, making shots in defence and then also having that ball-playing finesse and ability to be that second receiver. That's what a modern-day 12 has to be able to do.
Biggest influence in your career? Spencer Franks, my coach at Cobham all the way through. He was always encouraging us to play; you could hear him shout "*joué, joué*" from the sideline.
Your strengths? Ball-carrying. If nothing's going on, I can get over the gain-line and get some quick ball going. On the other side of the ball, I put my body on the line and always try and put a big shot on.
And work-ons? I've been working on speed, agility and fitness for a couple of years. And I'd like to improve my short kicking off both feet.
Are you studying? Yes, I'm doing a full-time Business Management degree at the University of Surrey.

RW VERDICT

Bradley has plenty of competition at both club and country but after waiting patiently behind Joe Hawkins and Mason Grady in the Wales U20 queue, there is no reason he cannot follow their path to the senior team in the future.

Go-forward
On Wales duty



Jumping highest
Evans in the lineout

2 CONNOR EVANS

Age **21 (24 Jan 2002)** Born **Cape Town** Position **Lock** Franchise **Stormers** Country **South Africa**

When did you first play rugby? I've been playing for as long as I can remember, but officially aged seven at Rhenish Primary School in Stellenbosch. Classic South African mini rugby, barefoot.
Did you play other sports? I played cricket and hockey at primary school. At high school, I did water polo provincially. The fitness helped as you swam a heck of a lot but I'd sink like a rock now!
What positions have you played? Lock and blindside flanker. I also got valuable experience at No 8 when I was 16 on a four-month exchange programme at Framlingham College over in England.
Any childhood heroes? Francois Pienaar. He was before my time, so I never got to actually watch him play but seeing his stories inspired me. I really liked Schalk Burger, too. He epitomises what all Western Cape rugby players want to be: a Province man, growing up in the Cape and becoming a Springbok.
How have you found turning pro? I haven't struggled with the physical aspect. Covid and staying at home helped me with being more professional as I missed the wild partying year at uni.
Biggest influence in your career? My parents have been amazing. Stormers coach John Dobson has been immense in my development, too. He's been very clear in saying that he wants to develop me and keep me for the near future.
What are your strengths? Without wanting to sound arrogant, I think I'm quite a skilful player. I see my strengths as my carrying and my skill at set-pieces.
And work-ons? I can be a bit lazy around the park. It's not a massive one but I'm working on it.
Are you studying? I'm in my third year at University of Cape Town, studying a Bachelor of Social Science, majoring in sociology and environmental and geographical science.
Who are you qualified to play for? South Africa and England.

RW VERDICT

Evans came to the fore for South Africa U20 last summer. With Champions Cup starts under his belt, he's set to be one of a key group of good youngsters that the Stormers can build their future around.

Should England players be available if they play abroad?

JAMIE NOON

The ex-England centre who's an agent in France

"THE 25-CAP rule is not a bad option. When we looked at the Welsh system it seemed logical for them to let players go away and still play for the national team. They are getting rid of their highest salaries and opening doors for younger guys to get more game time at clubs. These are Test players who are getting more experience and growing as people. I did it and it was better for me. At the age I went (31) I don't think I became a better player, but it opened my horizons. I probably knew my time in an England shirt was drawing to end.

"Salary caps offloading some of the financial burden of having a top-class player is not a bad thing – look at what happened to Wasps and Worcester. The top stars are huge earners and to not have to pick that bill up is the best of both worlds. The next guy, under a Dan Biggar from Wales for example, gets more games.

"A cap limit regulation means the best young guys don't go overseas and older, experienced guys on big money can go and are still able to play for England.

"England will have less control over when they play or training camps but these are older players. You trust they know what is expected of them. They know their bodies and someone of that calibre going into a French club would have a bit of clout to say 'I'm not doing that' or 'this is how I approach things'. Jonny Wilkinson did it at Toulon and he played for England. A younger guy needs to toe the line a bit."

English export Jack Willis is at Toulouse

ROB BAXTER

The director of rugby at Exeter Chiefs

"I'M THE director of rugby at a Premiership team so there is absolutely no way an England player should be allowed to be selected from outside England. No way at all.

"If the RFU want to stop players moving, there is a simple way to do it – put your hand in your pocket and pay. Basically what Steve Borthwick and the RFU are asking for is for other people to pay the salary and for players to still be available. It's like having your cake and eating it.

"I don't mind saying this, players will know it themselves, if you want to go and earn your biggest salary that's fine, but the lure is to stay in England, and to play for England. You need to be playing English club rugby. There is an expectation that is how it should be.

"I can understand Steve's point, he wants to be able to select the best players he can. But we are limited currently by the salary cap and by the financial position in the Premiership, so if the RFU want to bridge the gap they need to bridge the gap. I think that is quite a simple expectation from the Premiership, rather than trying to create exceptions when people can go and take salaries abroad.

"I like Steve, and we get on well, but that is real poacher turned gamekeeper, isn't it? If he was the head coach of Leicester he would be going, 'There is absolutely no way there should be any form of dispensation for any player playing outside the Premiership'."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Send your views to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

WHAT GOES ON TOUR…

[Goes in Rugby World]

I **WAS STILL** seeing out my time in Tredegar when Neath held a Christmas party, *writes former Wales No 8 Mark Jones*. It was fancy dress, with big, hairy-arsed forwards in frocks and such like. The party was in full swing but there was no sign of Lyn Jones. Elgan Rees was there with his glamorous wife. He was a Lion, a fabulous guy – handsome, polite, immaculately dressed and a super quick winger. They were the Posh and Becks of Neath.

Drinks were flowing with polite conversation; pop tunes added to the festive cheer. A lovely night was being had by all. But then…

The door of the bar burst open and in bounded a caped figure in a black bodysuit and a black face mask, a shaving foam pie in each hand. The 'Phantom Flan Flinger' had come to town and started to splat the players. Apparently, Lyn was dressed as the TV character to raise money for charity.

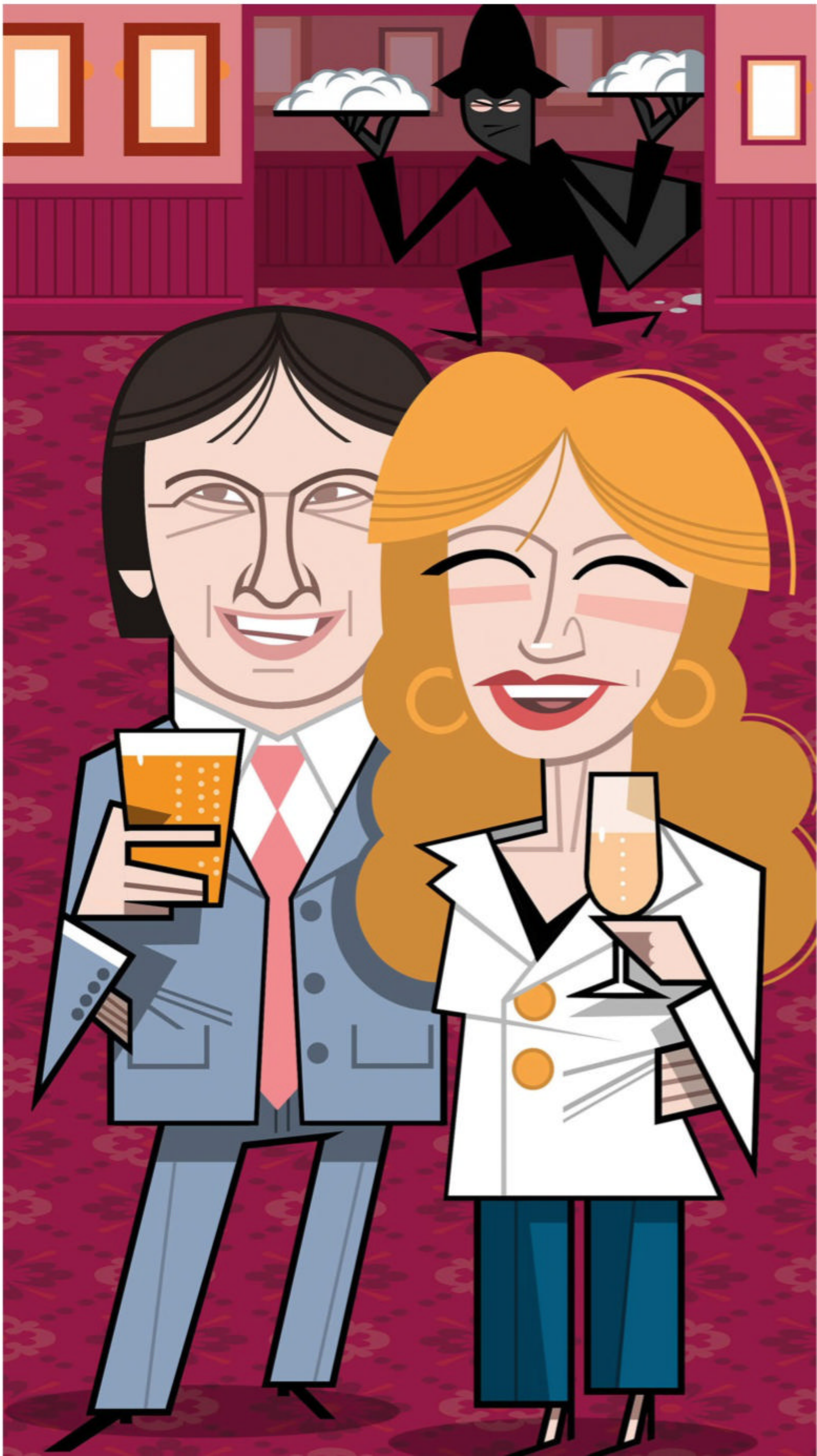
When the bar had been hit, he reloaded and proceeded into the lounge where a few couples had retired prior to his entry to enjoy a more intimate atmosphere. Elgan and Mrs Rees were in there, enjoying the evening. Well, they had been up until this point.

The offender ran in, shouting, "Who's first for the pie?" Splat! The treasurer caught one in the mush. Then the club doctor. "Who's next? Who's next?" Lyn continued on his trail of pie destruction.

You guessed it. Mrs Rees copped it straight in her face. SPLATTTT.

Silence. People stood in shock. Others laughed. Elgan and his wife weren't amused at all. I'm not sure if they've spoken to Lyn since…

From Mark Jones: Fighting to Speak, *St David's Press, £13.99*



WE WON'T TELL, PROMISE…

We love hearing your stories and want to celebrate the characters of our great game in What Goes On Tour… If you have an amusing tale to tell, drop us a line. Mark your email 'Tour Tale' and send it to rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

ILLUSTRATION David Lyttleton

Words **Alan Pearey** // Pictures **Rowan Kitt collection**

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO…

BE A TELEVISION MATCH OFFICIAL

Rowan Kitt tells RW about the thrills and stresses of life in the TV truck

BEING A TMO (Television Match Official) is easy, right? Just watch a replay of an incident and tell the referee what happened. Wrong! A chat with the RFU's Rowan Kitt, one of the best TMOs in the business, sheds a whole new light on the role of the match official who gets no credit when things go well and a heap of blame when things go askew. "You're basically the lowest of the low," says Kitt. We're not sure if he's joking.

So, what can a TMO intervene for? "Virtually anything. But it's about the quantity and quality of information," says Kitt, who has handled more than 300 pro games, including 50 Tier One Tests.

"So foul play that hasn't been seen, I might say 'neck roll by six black' to the referee. Restarts. Was it in touch? Or was it a 22 drop-out? Forward passes, within two phases of a try. Basically if the ref asks you a question you answer it.

"Technically I can come in for blatant knock-ons which lose us credibility as a match official team if we don't pick them up. But what we've said is really it has to be a match-defining decision; if it's 14-12 in the last minute and the ref gives it the wrong way, the TMO can save the day.

"Some things you're going to have to wear because otherwise you could be refereeing the whole game. There have been some bad examples this season where a TMO has broken the protocol early on and the referee (Karl Dickson being one example) hasn't trusted them later, and they've missed a big red card

Memorable day
Kitt with his fellow officials at Ireland v NZ, Chicago 2016

On duty
In Japan

Screen test
Lots to look at in the truck

because the TMO couldn't get the referee to look at it."

Kitt says the goalposts are always changing as World Rugby strives to create a more enjoyable game. "Our big buzzword this season is momentum. In all phases of the game. So no lineout huddles. Quickly set scrums. Shorter TMO referrals, where possible."

We cite the no-arms tackle by Albert Tuisue at Bath that saw referee Tom Foley brandish a yellow card on TMO Kitt's say-so. "Yeah, that's been a big thing we've tried to do this season. We want refs to give a yellow card without referring it. Like a deliberate knock-on or even a high tackle, let's give it and if it's clearly wrong the TMO will sweep up.

"But if we bring things to the referee's attention that we could do without, that is not the definition of a good TMO. So you're between a rock and a hard place. That's where game sense matters. You sense what the referee needs at that time because you know them so well."

Kitt says the language used has been worked on "meticulously, season upon season" because how TMOs interact with the ref, the speed and clarity of that exchange, is critical. Where once a TMO might have told a ref, "Barnesy, we need to check that", now they'll say, "Barnesy, I'm going to show you a forward pass."

That change in protocol stems from a 2018 Clermont v Racing quarter-final in which Wayne Barnes chose to ignore Kitt's suggestion for a review of a Dan Carter try-scoring pass. "It was a huge forward pass but I opened a bit of a door which said maybe I'll go with the referee's decision. So after that game, we decided as a refereeing unit, around the world, to say, 'I'm going to show you a forward pass' – no debate.

"The worst thing about that is that it ruined a night out in Clermont! We couldn't go to this nice restaurant we'd booked. Jean-Pierre Romeu, the France fly-half who became a referee manager, stormed into the changing room at the end and said, "It's a forward pass! It's a forward pass!" Then he took us into the Clermont fans' tent and everybody turned round, 'Ahh, the referees!' One guy put a camera in our face to film us. People were still raging about it."

A former grass-roots fly-half, Kitt joined the national referees' panel in 2000. He still referees at lower levels and has been a TMO since 2013. He receives a match fee and expenses. A history teacher by trade, he's now Fellow and Development Director at Queen's College, Cambridge, alma mater of the great Mike Gibson. The two chat regularly about the game.

His match prep starts in the week with a call with the 'team of four'. There are presentations to read, clips to watch. On match day he'll walk the pitch and watch the warm-ups. During a game he views every collision, every moment, via both his main stream and a second screen that has a six-second delay. He usually hears the TV commentary – "Austin Healey is very sharp" – but once something is formally referred that is switched off.

To an extent, he's at the mercy of TV directors and technicians. "Sometimes you want to see the same angle again but with slow motion you can't do that, the broadcasters have to show a different angle and then reload the original angle. You could get that next angle being useless, the ref is going, 'For God's sake, Kitty, show me the right angle!' And it's completely out of your hands. And then you get this thing in France, where they won't necessarily show you foul play by French players." A scandalous state of affairs that *Rugby World* has expounded on before.

"The biggest thing is concentration. Not miss anything for 80 minutes. And it's mentally exhausting. At the end you just sit there and you're shattered."

Which begs the question: why do it? "It distils down to love of the game and the mates you make. It's a bit of a drug: the anticipation before the game, the excitement of working in a team and aiming for world-class perfection.

"When you're doing New Zealand-South Africa in Wellington it feels like a battle and those guys on the pitch trust you, innately, to cover them. And that's a big responsibility.

"But we're good at de-stressing after a match, it normally involves 95 beers and a curry. We're all rugby guys, we love our sport, we just do our bit." RW

DID YOU KNOW?

Kitt's favourite game as a TMO was when Ireland beat the All Blacks for the first time, Chicago 2016.

"It was only the second rugby game the TV crew had ever filmed. And the first, USA v Maoris, was the night before. I recall the video operator saying, 'Gee, they pass back a lot in this game!' There were a lot of referrals but we came through it."

Team of four
Post match in Dublin

> **"Concentration is the biggest thing. It's mentally exhausting. By the end you're shattered"**

RUGBY RANT

Co-captains muddy the waters and are a nonsense, argues Josh Graham

THERE IS a reason job sharing has never taken off. Only the most precise of circumstances lend themselves to two individuals balancing the same responsibility, and rugby is no different.

Brilliant leadership brings clear and concise authority but having co-captains in a rugby side blurs the lines. Don't get me wrong, there's definitely a place for a club captain and an on-field captain.

Jack Yeandle and Joe Simmonds dovetailed perfectly for Exeter in 2020, the latter picking up an MBE after steering the Chiefs to the double.

The off-field responsibilities of representing the club go far beyond on-field captaincy and one individual may not be suited to the two roles.

Double trouble Owen Farrell and Dylan Hartley

PICS Getty Images

However, it is simply overkill to have two people supposedly in charge on the pitch.

> "Mathieu Raynal had to listen to both forwards offering their two cents on his decision"

In fact, it is impossible. You cannot have two players at the coin toss, nor two players at the end of a line for a national anthem. You should not have two players constantly liaising with the referee and you definitely can't have two spokespeople for one team.

The Red Roses named Sarah Hunter and Marlie Packer as co-captains for this year's TikTok Women's Six Nations. It symbolised the passing of the baton as Hunter retired after her homecoming in Newcastle in the first game v Scotland.

No problem there. But you would have thought that England's most-capped player of all time could have been bestowed the honour of being listed as the sole captain for her last dance. Alas.

It is a curse plaguing the men's game, too. Scotland captain Jamie Ritchie shares domestic honours with lock Grant Gilchrist at URC side Edinburgh.

And in their Champions Cup last 16 defeat to Leicester, poor French referee Mathieu Raynal was obliged to stand and listen to both forwards offering their two cents whenever he penalised them. So much for speeding up the game.

Even if you are on board with this rudderless style of leadership, surely the logical thing to do would be to at least pick a forward and a back. Oh no, Hunter and Packer and Ritchie and Gilchrist were scrumming down just inches from one another.

Eddie Jones at least ticked that box when he named Andy Farrell and Steve Borthwick as Saracens co-captains in 2008 before aligning Dylan Hartley and Owen Farrell with England ten years later. Something Clive Woodward described as "unnecessary" and "muddying the waters" in the *Mail*.

Sometimes less is more. Put simply, nobody grows up dreaming of only having one hand on the trophy. RW

HAVE YOUR SAY

What gets your goat? Let us know on Facebook or tweet @Rugbyworldmag

SHORT PASS

ON YOUR MARKS
Mark Wilson will leave his coaching role at Newcastle Falcons for a job outside rugby.

NEW CHIEF
Ospreys and Wales centre Joe Hawkins (right) has signed for Exeter for next season.

BILLY MOVES ON
Billy Twelvetrees is leaving Gloucester at the end of the season after 11 years and over 270 games for the club.

WELSH DOUBLE
Wales won both the men's and women's events at the Deaf Rugby Sevens World Cup in Argentina.

CHOCKS AWAY!
Scotland hooker Stuart McInally, 32, will retire after the World Cup to become a pilot.

TIME UP
Tom Collins is leaving Northampton Saints after 11 years at his home-town club.

NRL RETURN
The All Blacks' Roger Tuivasa-Sheck will go back to rugby league in 2024 after signing a three-year deal with New Zealand Warriors.

CHAMPIONS AGAIN
Exeter University retained their BUCS Super Rugby title with an extra-time 48-44 win v Loughborough.

INSIDE THE MIND OF... IAN McKINLEY

Interview **Alan Pearey** // Picture **Stu Forster/Getty Images**

Insights from the Irishman who played for Italy after losing sight in one eye

"I was at infants school in Dublin with **Gareth Anscombe**. I was five, he was four. Later I played against him in the Six Nations!"

"This month sees the first visually impaired rugby game in Ireland. It's at the Old Wesley club in Dublin, against a team from England. I've worked with the **Change Foundation** since 2018. They're a fantastic organisation for those who might not have an avenue to get involved in sport. Visually impaired rugby is a branch of that."

"I **wrote a book** (*Second Sight*) because my story is quite unique. It's important to get across that if you have fallen in life, which I certainly did, there are good people around you who will help. You need that bit of resilience. It was a feel-good story in the end."

"The best I ever played with was **Isa Nacewa**. If he hadn't had that one cap for Fiji, he'd have won numerous caps for New Zealand. He was such an intelligent player and a very humble person. I learnt a lot from him."

"I'm proud that every country allows **rugby goggles** (after he lobbied for five years). A few thousand people are registered to use them. I still receive messages from people about the goggles and it's hugely humbling."

"I think **New Zealand** will win this year's World Cup. They're under the radar but beware of a wounded All Black. Ireland are in the best position they can be in. Everything Andy Farrell has done he's clearly got right."

"I'm head coach of **Rainey Old Boys**. I have huge admiration for guys that work full-time and tog out Tuesday and Thursday nights to play a game on a Saturday. I'm learning a lot."

"So many positive and negative things happened because of my injury. And that's what **life is about**. Without it, would I have moved to Italy at 21? And learnt a language? I wouldn't have known this visually impaired world that has given me huge satisfaction to work in."

"I support **Charlton Athletic**. In the early 2000s, the Alan Curbishley years, they finished seventh in the Premier League. I liked their jersey and their players. I've stuck with them."

"I'll move back to Italy one day. I grew up in Ireland but Italy is a symbol for a **second beginning** in my life. I have a huge amount of friends there. They gave me support when I needed it most. I'd love to be part of the Italian rugby movement going forward."

"I was part of **Italy**'s 36-game drought and it was a tough place to be. But now they're playing really attractive rugby. Players like Garbisi, Lamaro and Capuozzo are seriously talented. Ultimately it was still five defeats (in the Six Nations) but they've made huge strides."

“To be able to use her body like she does now is amazing”

NATIONAL
HERO

Sisilia Tuipulotu

The Wales prop is a force of nature, despite her tender years

Words **Harry Latham-Coyle** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

THE BLOODLINES are strong. Father Sione won 29 caps for Tonga. Brother Kepu is making waves in the London Irish academy and with England U18. Cousin Carwyn is starting to break through at the Scarlets.

Yet even in a family blessed with talent, the game-changing ability and barrier-breaking potential of Sisilia Tuipulotu manage to stand out. "I believe she can be one of the best props in the world," Wales head coach Ioan Cunningham enthuses of his young front-row star. You cannot disagree.

The prop might already be threatening that sort of tag. The first two weeks of the Women's Six Nations brought three tries, a combined carrying tally of nearly 150 metres and consecutive Player of the Match awards. "Sisilia's development has been brilliant over the last six weeks with us," Cunningham adds. "I still think she's got a lot of potential and growth left in her. We are delighted with her."

There are plenty of reasons for the rugby world to be fearful of where the youngster might go. For any 19-year-old to be making an impact at Test level would be achievement enough, but the Gloucester-Hartpury player has been a tighthead prop for less than a year. Tuipulotu may have obvious physical gifts but she is very new to the intricacies of a front-row skirmish.

Thunderball
In club colours

Her conversion from lock is proving a masterstroke from Cunningham, who saw that while Tuipulotu might become international class there, her ceiling at prop was higher. A swift schooling in the dark arts during last year's World Cup is beginning to pay sizeable dividends.

Her try-scoring prowess is a particular asset. As Wales look to evolve, red-zone efficiency is a work-on and it certainly helps to have a carrier with Tuipulotu's close-range potency. Her emerging breakdown threat shows nous beyond her years, and the teenager still finds herself deployed in the engine room for Gloucester-Hartpury, where head coach Sean Lynn is blessed with rare tighthead depth but also understandably wants Tuipulotu on the field.

"Since she first came in at 18 she has grown so, so much," explains England second-row Zoe Aldcroft, a club-mate. "To be able to use her body like she does now is amazing. The amount she lifts in the gym is unbelievable. She benches 100 kilograms easily, squats more than 120 kilos – and she looks so calm doing it!

"She's smiling and saying, 'Put some more on there!' There's more growth to come from her. She's just learning year by year and I think she could become unbelievable, not that she isn't already."

Admirers are plentiful and prominent: Billy Vunipola has described her as "the next big thing". Sarah Bern, the current queen of tighthead play, is another. Like her fellow front-rower, Bern began her career elsewhere before a conversion in nascent days at international level.

"She seems like an absolutely lovely girl," Bern says. "I know from a lot of the Gloucester-Hartpury players that she's a brilliant athlete. She's also super strong and naturally this big ball-carrier and that's your super strength, so run with it.

"That's what I would say to a younger player: develop your super strength and keep pushing it and keep getting better and everything else will come. But at the end of the day, we know we're all tightheads, so we have to make sure that we can scrum first…"

Progress on that front would appear to be going rather well if last month's clash at Cardiff Arms Park is anything to go by, Tuipulotu dominating a strong English tight five to earn two first-half scrum penalties. After little more than a year as a professional, and not yet out of her teens, Tuipulotu is already one of the Women's Six Nations' most impactful forwards. And there could be much, much more to come. RW

FACT FILE

Age 19 (14 Aug 2003)
Born Newport
Height 5ft 9in
Weight 17st 7lb
Position Prop
Caps Ten (3T)
Twitter @SisiliaT14

STATS Correct as of 21/4/23

ISLANDS IN THE SUN

A proper first home match for Moana Pasifika augurs well, says Alan Pearey

ONE BY one, the building blocks are being laid. Round eight of Super Rugby Pacific saw history made as Moana Pasifika played their first-ever match in Apia.

The franchise lost 40-28 to the Reds to continue their winless run, but no one was seeing negatives on a day described by the great Michael Jones as a "very special moment… a dream to play on Samoan soil". "Hopefully this is the first of many," added Bryan Williams, another All Black legend of Samoan descent.

Moana Pasifika represent players from Samoa, Tonga and other islands, along with New Zealand or Australia-born players of Pasifika heritage. They and Fijian Drua, Fiji's domestic team, joined Super Rugby last year to help redress the balance after decades of exploitation of Pacific Islands talent by Tier One nations.

Despite their small populations, the islands provide a fifth of the world's pro players, many of them playing for other countries. Fiji, Samoa and Tonga all failed to qualify for the knockout stage of the last World Cup, but Super Rugby Pacific is now providing a credible platform for island talent.

"We are aware of why our team was formed and who it's for, every Pacific Island person," Moana Pasifika coach Aaron Mauger told *stuff.co.nz*. "Not just rugby players but it's an opportunity to really inspire our people.

Historic occasion
Moana Pasifika win ball against the Reds at Apia Park

"We'd love to be based in the islands. It's a big job creating the infrastructure to do that and to compete at the highest level. We're not playing club rugby, we're playing against seasoned internationals.

"Our function is to promote the pathway for aspiring young Pasifika players to play for Manu Samoa, 'Ikale Tahi (Tonga), our Cook Islands team.

"We've also got to understand that a lot of our Pasifika players have grown up in New Zealand or Australia. So that might not have been the first choice for them growing up, but it's our aspiration to try to swing them back into that space (of playing for island nations)."

Samoan culture
Half-time entertainment

The scenes at Apia Park, where home fans sang and danced during the match against the Reds, showed how much it meant for Samoans to see their heroes in the flesh when they usually play 1,800 miles away in Auckland. There were special cheers for Miracle Fai'ilagi, who hails from the Vailele village close to the stadium and who scored two of Moana's tries.

Not to be outshone, Fijian Drua relished a shock defeat of Crusaders on home soil, courtesy of Kemu Valetini's late penalty. They had lost 61-3 to the 13-time champions last year. Fijiana Drua also played two home games in the women's competition, Super Rugby W.

Encouraging signs in Oceania.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

TONY DIPROSE

Age **50** Position **No 8** Teams **Saracens, Harlequins, England & Lions**

"FOR THE past three years I've been director of sport at Canford School, Dorset, which I joined when I finished at Harlequins. I retired from playing in 2006 and had looked at education as a career but Dean Richards, the DoR at Quins, asked if I could work as assistant academy manager. I was there for the next 13 years, then moved into first-team coaching, mainly overseeing defence.

"When Conor O'Shea left, I helped set up the women's and girls' programme. One of the last groups of mine through the academy contained the likes of Hugh Tizard, Marcus Smith and Cadan Murley.

"In 2020 I came to Canford where I'm involved in football, cricket, rowing and rugby. Peter Short, the former Exeter and Bath player, has just left as director of rugby, so I'll be doing more of that and Matt Keech (ex-Middlesex and Hants) looks after the cricket. Like the academy work, it's about trying to get people to make the best of themselves."

PICS Getty Images

SCOTT ROBERTSON

The Crusaders boss and the next All Blacks head coach discusses his approach

“My coaching philosophy is to create an environment of care”

Pulling together The Crusaders

I LOVED THE camaraderie of the game as I turned professional, but also the teaching in the game.

Wayne Smith effectively taught us the game at the Crusaders. We were last in Super Rugby in 1996, and he came in and talked to us about defence, the mindset that is required, structures, individual skill-sets. I just wanted to be involved with this as much as I could.

So I had my little notebook and back in those days I’d walk around with it as I coached the Christ College U16 B team. That’s where it all started.

I’d also seen a bit of the world, having gone across to play for Ards in Northern Ireland and I’d spent some time with Ayr, in Scotland. I’d learnt a lot about myself and met some incredible people.

I knew I could play, and knew I could do something with the gifts my mum and dad had given me. So I made a promise to them on the way home. First I apologised for some of my teenage behaviours! I told them how I was going to be committed and how I was going to become an All Black and get a degree. Those two or three years were a way for me to find out who I was, but also what I wanted to do, what I wanted to achieve. Look, I’m still doing it now, coaching.

Of course, in this game you need to know who you are, what your strengths are and what areas you need support in. As a coach I’m a great ideas man but I also need people that are finishers, I need experts in different areas, I need people to help me tell the story. I’ve grown and evolved because I know what the current group at the Crusaders need. However, over time you look at the game differently, too. You mature, you learn things. Things that used to worry you earlier on tend to wash away.

My coaching philosophy is to create an environment of care. That’s probably the biggest thing I look at. I care about things on and off the field; I care about how players are going to get better and I care about their wellbeing in what is a tough sport. If I provide enough care for players, they’ll care about themselves, they’ll care about their performance. That approach makes you accountable but there is a lot of love in it too, I find.

It can be tough building an environment but at the Crusaders we don’t use the word ‘challenge’ – we just ask, “Could we do that better?” It’s not threatening language. We talk a lot about the idea or the theme for the week, or even for the season. It comes back to the overarching question: what’s our mission? Then we’ll talk about it, battle it out on how we get better. We are all pretty close, so we do that, then take a step back.

For example, I’ve got an awesome analyst, a guy called Jon Gardner from Wales, and we’ve worked together a long time. He knows how I work, my mindset. You need allies like that as you create the right environment. And you have to be mindful of that every year as you build on it again, so you continually ensure you have an environment where people feel safe. But look, I also go to work and coach with a lot of friends. I’m fortunate to have been at the Crusaders for a long time and with mates you can have the conversations that need to be had.

We are willing to have conversations with others outside the organisation too, through our coaching leadership programme, and we’ve got one in May. We can share with people because the next time we go to do something, we’ll do it better or different, or we’ll evolve.

So we’ll share the insights from the Crusaders. And when you’re talking, you dive into the conversations and it probably reteaches you as well, so it helps you along the way. And we’re not threatened by sharing our information! Because someone has still got to put that into practice for themselves.

And it’s just in our nature at the Crusaders to share. It’s also good to go back into your memories for things you’ve done together and forgotten!

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“IF THERE’S ANYTHING TO TAKE FROM THIS INTERVIEW, IT’S LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF”

Words **Alan Dymock** // Main Image **Phil Barker**

There’s been a lot of growth for Sale Sharks and England star **TOM CURRY** over the last few years and he’s open to more change if he can hit new heights

SOME CAMPS can be brutal. Repetition. Being confronted with how you *should* do things. The barked commands. But then when the hard yakka bears fruit, oh boy, can you appreciate the results.

Right there on a rainy Hale street, you see the evidence. Toby doesn't hesitate to come to heel. His treat is well earned.

The black and caramel dachshund is out for a walk with owner Tom Curry, a first day back at home after weeks of grinding at doggy bootcamp. And you can tell the Sale, England and Lions bruiser is chuffed with the result. With a call of "close", Toby comes by Curry's side. The analysis, the training, has paid off. And then with a shout of "Finish!" he is off again, on the hunt for another outsized stick to chew.

On a dreich day in this Trafford suburb, Curry explains why he wanted his show-stealing best pal to be trained up, to unlearn the encounters with bulldogs when scrappy Toby learnt nipping was working for him, or how England team-mates Ellis Genge, Jamie George and Sale's Akker van der Merwe sang of the benefits.

It feels like quite an adult thing to do, we remark. "Well, even getting a dog is proper adulting," Curry replies. "He's taught me a lot, to be fair. As in having a dog has." But the theme of learning – of growth – is a standout. And it all starts by looking back on 2019, when England fell at the last hurdle in Yokohama, losing a World Cup final to South Africa. How does he reflect on those experiences?

"Yeah, special," he says. "It's brilliant because you know where you have to be. Where you need to get to and what the requirements are. And it's not just about the Rugby World Cup. It's the pre-season. It's getting yourself right in the off-season before. So it gives you an understanding of where you need to be at and ultimately how to get better. Like, we've done it one way – we got second. So we need to do it another way. And with a totally fresh, new set of players."

And him? How different is he today?

"If I spoke to my girlfriend, she'd tell me how different I am. She knows me best. I think a lot has changed between 2019 and now. And not just physically but mentally. Everything's kind of taken a step forward, which has been good.

"You know how in life you get these milestones? Having a World Cup every four years, you can look back and understand what's happened in the last few years. You can look back, reflect and then you can move forward.

"And there are times when you need to reflect, but it depends on what mood you're in. You can look back on a game and think, 'That was really frustrating', and then there's times where you look back at a game and it's like 'I did everything I could, physically'." And sometimes, we hazard, s*** happens.

Emotional energy
Preparing for a game

"Exactly," he says as we round another bend in the park. "I think the biggest growth from where I came from is that before, I was very worried pre-game and even post-game – I'd be like 'I could have done this, I should have done this'. And I think it was working with the psychologist with England, where it was about just knowing that you've given everything you've got.

"We got to a point where we literally had one or two points we knew we could hit. For me it was getting up off the ground and then when the ball's in the air 'sprint'. And I know if I did those things, I'd be in the game and when I'm

> **"Now I'm like, 'I'm just gonna throw the kitchen sink at this!' If I'm up on my feet and sprinting, you've just got to back yourself"**

in the game and just working on intuition, that's when I am at my best.

"I feel like being in the moment comes quite naturally to me and when I'm doing that I'm making my best decisions. Like, 'just get up and make a tackle'. When I'm in the flow of things, that's when I feel I'm at my best. And that doesn't take sitting down and going, 'I need to put my arm here and do that there'."

Hitting that plane is easier said than done for most, but Curry says you know you are there when the little mistakes don't matter to you. Of course, he takes this all very seriously, but out between the white lines a player in the moment can shake off the blips much better.

As he says: "I think that's been part of the growth. Before, before a game I'd be like, 'Oh, I need to do this or 'they've got this' or 'I need to do that'. Now I'm like, 'Right, I'm just gonna throw the kitchen sink at this!' And if I'm up on my feet and I'm sprinting, then you have just got to back yourself, you know?"

An untethered Tom Curry will likely be a worrying thought for so many opponents and coaches. Less the fly in the ointment than the dachsund in the duck pond (Toby knows where there's a hole in the fence around the park's water features, so we steer ourselves back towards grass).

Distribution network
Passing v New Zealand

Yes, this is probably more of reverting back to what things were like when we were kids. Which is alright. One Test head coach recently intimated to *Rugby World* that they've delved back into the archives to see if any attacking ideas can come from watching matches from the Eighties and Nineties. Going back to the future is alright, guys.

And intrinsically linked to that, deep down, is the notion of enjoyment. Loving the game for its game-like qualities. Just playing, in the purest possible sense. On the walk, we explore just that, the fun of fun and perhaps taking ourselves that *tiny bit* less seriously.

"One of my team-mates looking at it from the outside would probably say I take rugby too seriously! Which I do, 100%. But that's probably another area of growth, with my switch on, switch off button. I think that's probably pushed me towards a point of thinking more clearly than I was able to when I was 18 or 19. I'd wonder if, even though I was still playing good rugby, whether it's sustainable. But now it's very much switch on, switch off. I'm better at that."

Tom and his twin Ben have both been playing elite rugby since they were very young. He can say with hindsight now that young pros who go straight from school into this life need to be afforded opportunities to find out about themselves. That can shape a playing persona, and perhaps the hunt for longevity has this built in, too. He cites his Sale and England team-mate Manu Tuilagi as someone who has a more relaxed approach to training, while he can sometimes end up treating it like a match. The joy, perhaps, is in learning to change. He won't say he has all the answers now though, and in fact Curry says he is already interested in how his outlook and training methods adapt four years from now. He jokes that he may look back on this interview and say, 'What the hell am I talking about?!"

Mind you, the quest for improvement now has led him to look at how his body functions. He has recently come through a hamstring injury, and missed a whack of action with Sale as well as the Six Nations – while brother Ben pulled on England white. Today Tom is looking for, as he puts it, better ways to move.

Twin perspective
Talking with brother Ben

FACT FILE

Age 24 (15 Jun 1998)
Born Hounslow
Club Sale Sharks
Position Back-row
Height 6ft 1in
Weight 17st 5lb
England caps 45 (4T)
Instagram handle
@thomascurry_7

"It's yoga, sauna. I don't go to the gym anymore and it's just benchpress. And this is only in the last three months. It's about other things. That's something I've really been fulfilled with recently.

"I remember speaking to Kyle Sinckler because he does a lot of sauna and I said, 'I don't really want to do that, it's not for me.' Now it's all different and that's the thing – this is a never-ending book. Everything always changes."

Not that he is grilling every rugby player he knows to find out their secrets and change his own approach every week. The above interaction with prop Sinckler was much more organic than that, but everyone will take away something different from interactions in camp or on long training days.

We'll also get to the changing off-pitch elements of Curry's life and his business interests with his brother, but there are also some constants for the back-row. ➡

Curry in a hurry Against Argentina

➡ As he explains, game days are open to variety, but the way he starts them never does. It goes: coffee, bus, same playlist. Always. Then he gets going.

But then he adds of a routine: "When I get changed before the game, I'm a bit OCD. Like, I feel like I have to scrub each arm the same amount of times, the same way. And everything has to be the same. But that's not a superstitious thing, it's just what I've always done."

Has he ever spoken to Henry Slade, the Exeter and England centre who has talked well of his diagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder? "I've not really told anyone that. I only just spoke about it with my missus the other day and she was like, 'That's a bit weird!' It's literally like, 'one, two, three…' But it's not superstitious at all. I just like having the same thing and then it's just about getting excited for it by that point."

Curry talks a few times about his day-to-day routine during a recent stint rehabbing. The quirky thing being that in his time away from the national set-up, he got to see brother Ben get his shot with England. Tom explains that he was only in national camp himself for a few hours one day, laughing about it being "one in, one out!", but he is made up about seeing Ben play – particularly as he missed the chance to watch his brother with a rose on his chest whilst Tom was on the British & Irish Lions tour to South Africa in 2021. The recent Six Nations was special for the family, to see Ben earning his just rewards for seasons of hard work and leadership with Sale.

Maybe it would be weirder if they were there together, because as much as it's a gag about one in, one out, it's all they've ever known on the national stage. However, it is the dream to play together for England, he says. And it certainly works for Sale having the pair at six and seven. In the recent league win at Bristol, BT Sport gave the Man of the Match award to both of them as they couldn't separate the two performances.

"I'm a bit OCD. I feel like I have to scrub each arm the same amount of times, the same way. Everything has to be the same"

Shark ace It's fourth time in the play-offs for Sale

The pair still live together, though Tom laughs that this is purely down to interest rates at the moment. He's clued up on all of that because the Currys run a property business together. So as well as their own home, they are renting one out to team-mate Jonny Hill (at a very reasonable rate, he stresses). We wonder what the business is like.

"When it comes to that stuff, as long as Ben's happy, everything's alright!" he says. "It's funny, though, we have a utilities bill on the other house for £16 and he's saying, 'Can everyone pay me £5.30.' And we're like, 'We'll just get you a coffee'. I don't think he's too happy about that. But no, it's good."

On how this came about, he explains: "We set up a property company with Tom Curtis, who lives in one of these as well," he says, pointing across the park. "We managed to buy one (a house) at a really good rate. It was actually about 500 metres that way. We were going to get that renovated and then house prices began flattening. The cost of materials is going up and then interest rates started to creep up. So we sold it on with planning permission and we ended up cutting our losses.

"It was just right house, wrong time. But you manage to speak to a lot of people and the advice was not to chase it. We made an educated decision. Because I imagine we could have done it, but you do all that work for not much profit… I think you have to be honest.

"Early on, especially if it's a refurb, a refinance or extending – basically anything to do with doing up properties – the advice was that you never make as much as you think and that you might lose on the first one or two properties.

"So we do more buy-to-lets now. My cousin is Sam Olver, who plays for Doncaster. He runs a sourcing company with his mate for houses. They do all the groundwork in terms of the research. A lot of it's based around Doncaster but I know they're looking at a few elsewhere. It's a really interesting market at the minute, especially around Doncaster."

It may feel like Ben wears the big boy pants more often than not when it comes to the business. Or at least that is the front that Tom is projecting. However, as we fittingly circle back during the meandering walk around the park, similarities between the twins comes up as we return to the idea of learning about your own body. It's particularly interesting as while some players might live with fellow athletes, Curry currently lives with one who is physiologically incredibly similar. In fact, that feels like a silly understatement.

"We've literally had the same problems," Tom starts. "So he did his hamstring, came back, did his hamstring again.

"We are way more identical than we think. And then I was asking him the ➡

With the real star
Tom – in a Moss suit
– and his dog Toby

→ other day about his orthotics and where to get them because we both had our big toes injected last week. So we're more identical than we realise, even if we look a little less like it now."

We dare not disagree with him on this front, though of course those two have always been able to see the differences. But there is more that they do together.

Tom is pleased to wear his favourite Manchester United rain jacket out – and in a Pavlovian way, Toby gets excited whenever he sees it, we are told, because that means it's time to trot. But the brothers have never had season tickets, even if they have been officially listed as 'celebrity' United fans before.

Instead, the pair have shares in Crewe Alexandra, picking them up when the club recently faced financial peril. They've been to watch them a few times since. And being in the area is a good excuse to revisit their childhood rugby club, Crewe & Nantwich. And if you want another footballing connection, the brothers' cousin Patrick Jarrett is also a pro footballer, currently with Queen's Park in the Scottish Championship.

The love for playing his sport is evident throughout the afternoon. Sale have clicked this season, setting up camp in the play-off spots and securing their ticket for the knockouts by mid-April. The sense around Hale is that there is a real buzz for this group to be playing together. Curry is also thrilled to see the women's team secure their place in the Premier 15s next season. He has helped coach them this season on breakdown technique – and it's worth keeping an ear out for Curry's coaching path in the future, we suspect.

But on swimming with Sharks this season, the back-rower says: "If you look at the men's team at Sale, and how the young lads are coming through there, like Gus (Warr), Tom Roebuck, (Joe) Carpenter, Arron Reed, Sam Dugdale – you look at those and that's really strong.

"We've got really ambitious owners, we've got a really ambitious CEO and the club is going in the right direction. We have the (rugby director) in Alex Sanderson. So all of my perceptions are really positive.

"The coaches are brilliant and we do our analysis, but when we are at our best is when we don't focus on 'them' too much. There's that balance. I think we've got that right this season. George Ford has been brilliant and Rob du Preez has also been brilliant, in terms of them organising our attack.

"I think before we probably relied on individuals doing something, or it would come around once in a blue moon, a good team performance. Whereas now, it's just the way that we play – we play like that week in, week out. This year has been really positive and I think the change is probably in our attack and in our ambitious mindset."

Walking laps of the park? We have almost run a groove in the pathway, and as the size of sticks Toby is going for get gradually bigger, there's a risk he'll carry off an uprooted oak at some point. Content to come back to 'close', the four-legged hero makes his way home,

A tour like no other
Curry started all three Lions Tests in South Africa

TAKING THE LEAD

In 2022, the then 23-year-old Curry skippered his national side for the first time, in a Calcutta Cup match in the Six Nations. In doing so he became England's youngest captain since Will Carling in 1988. They lost 20-17. Curry led England against the Barbarians later that year and the flanker is also part of Sale's leadership group.

Playing the fun way Keeping London Irish at arm's length in Sale colours

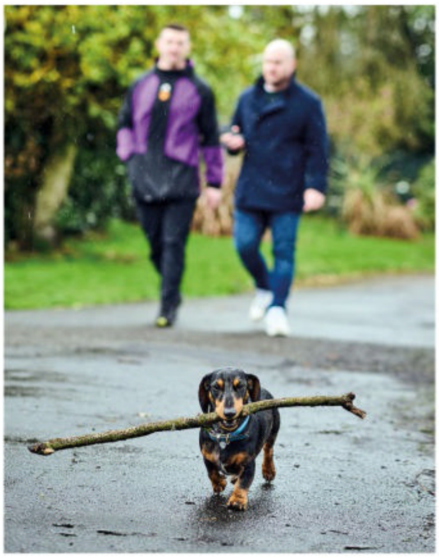
Playing the fun way Keeping London Irish at arm's length in Sale colours

> “This year at Sale has been really positive. The change is probably in our attack and in our ambitious mindset”

safe in the knowledge the humans will be matching his stride. It's mad to think we've photobombed his shoot, really.

As a player, you may not know which box to put Curry into. He has been a versatile option across the back row in his short but jam-packed career to date. And while you might see his future as a six or a seven, depending on your tastes, there is a sense that while striving to find the joy in every element of the game, he naturally slots into the best role for him on the park anyway.

He talks about the short shortlist of jobs he needs to focus on in order to free himself up to be at his best. Getting off the ground to whack blokes: check. Hammering after the ball in the air: check. That hounding of opponents will always be part of his game. But don't sleep on his distribution skills, or his change of pace. He is a thoroughly modern player in teams that are hitting their rhythm, or are building something new. It will be an exciting time for him.



Outsized ambition Toby makes off with a hefty stick

PICS Getty Images & Phil Barker

And he seems relaxed enough to know what he wants from himself. As he makes clear to us, unprompted: “If there's anything to take from this interview, it's learning about myself. You have to do it yourself. And whether that is from a life perspective or a rugby perspective, I think learning the lessons myself has been the biggest positive over the last few years.”

Contemporary rugby players – or just athletes, really – tend not to look too far ahead. Process-driven beasts, so many of them, it's the next job, the next event, the next camp, the next stick to pick up.

However, that approach is used by Curry in a way to contemplate his future. He says on the way down the road home: “I think for me that is why the property stuff is happening a bit. As in I never want it to be like the main thing. I always want to have that as a side thing, to keep ticking over and enjoy, but never really want that to become my job and my be-all and end-all.

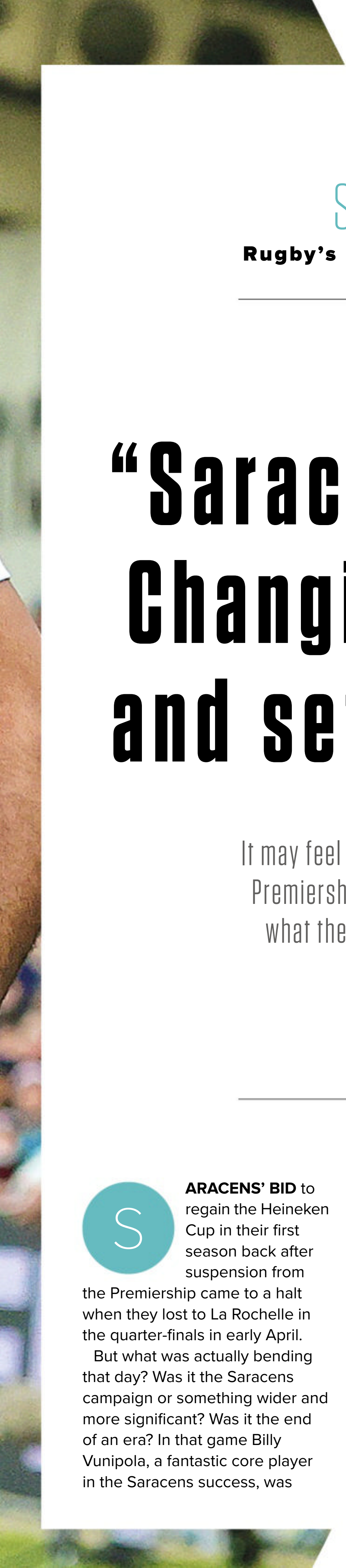
“It's a nice distraction. It's not stressing me out. Moving forward, I'd like to keep it that way. It's a tough one because everyone is different when it comes to coaching. In four or five years, it might be very different. But right now I'd be very interested. I love the game, I love learning about it. I think there's so many small nuances in the game that make such a big difference, and you hear people complaining about stuff like the kicking in the middle, but I find it fascinating. I think it's brilliant.

“People say, ‘This is boring’ but it's not, because something has to come from it, someone has to blink, someone ends up losing it. And if you look at it, you can see who's winning and losing the battle. The stats say you don't really want the ball a lot of the time. There's proper analysis on this; they're not just kicking it away because they're not thinking.

“I love it, I think the game is brilliant. Obviously there are other things that go on in rugby that are above (my) pay grade, so you just let other people crack on with it. I think it's a good battle.”

Every battler in this game needs good sidekicks. And as little legs come to the next crossing, eager to scurry back on a familiar route, a command comes in to stop. Involuntarily, we find ourselves halting too. No bootcamp needed.

The secret's out
Kapeli Pifeleti celebrates a try



STEPHEN JONES

Rugby's most outspoken and influential journalist

"Saracens are changing. Changing for the better and setting an example"

It may feel like 'same old Sarries' – and they are still one of the Premiership's undeniable forces. But Stephen Jones digs into what the future could hold for this project in North London

SARACENS' BID to regain the Heineken Cup in their first season back after suspension from the Premiership came to a halt when they lost to La Rochelle in the quarter-finals in early April.

But what was actually bending that day? Was it the Saracens campaign or something wider and more significant? Was it the end of an era? In that game Billy Vunipola, a fantastic core player in the Saracens success, was replaced with what looked like a serious knee injury and he's now in a race to make the World Cup.

Saracens have still dominated the Premiership this season, with some thunderous performances, not least the day when they put 50 points past Leicester. They have changed style and become a wonderfully attractive team, one of the reasons the feeble cats' chorus which would have Owen Farrell dumped from the England team in favour of Marcus Smith often sounded so ridiculous.

Farrell has been a titan in Saracens' attacking set-up and, as we went to press, they had secured a home advantage in the play-offs and were still substantial favourites to take the title. They've won the European Cup three times, the Premiership five, and been so good that not only have they dominated but sent most English clubs into fits of jealousy.

But what happens next? Whether or not they take the title this year, an era does seem to be ending. Mako Vunipola has ➡

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➡ been playing wonderful rugby and Billy was showing signs of returning to his best, with England's options at No 8 more a chasm than an area of strength. But neither brother can be considered in the long term anymore.

Furthermore, the great Alex Goode, who may well be the finest all-round talent that English rugby has ever produced, is now approaching 35. Sean Maitland also approaches his mid-30s, and Max Malins is moving on to Bristol to achieve a greater permanency in his regular playing position of full-back.

We can return to the team rebuilding but what of the club itself? Saracens now have an air of permanence about them after all the years when they were trying to upgrade themselves from park-pitch affections to a grandstanding professional outfit. At a time when the Premiership has looked a little wonky, Saracens have established themselves more securely than ever at the StoneX Stadium, which for me is the best club ground in the sport and, significantly, the most friendly. There is a philosophy underpinning the whole thing that Saracens are rather glad that people come along to watch them, rather than seeing followers as some kind of given.

> **"A case can be made that Mark McCall is one of the leading three coaches anywhere in the world"**

StoneX, City Index and Roc Nation have come in to help as the sport tears itself out of its old and rather humdrum communications and marketing policies into a new era to attract people from outside the normal orbit.

Nigel Wray is still one of the main investors, although he has stepped away from the chairmanship. His family continues to have a massive role. But the board is also full of big names and hard hitters, not the sort who would treat a rugby club as a frippery or allow it to sink into bankruptcy.

They also have in their portfolio Saracens High School and the Saracens Primary School, with another primary school on its way. To have established schools is a stupendous achievement, as the surrounding area has never been satisfactory in providing schooling for the multicultural society in North London.

Sidelined Billy Vunipola, a Sarries mainstay, faces a fitness battle

So people can throw darts into Saracens all they like, they can whine about the infringement of the salary cap, but at present Saracens are the archetype of what club rugby anywhere in the world should be and they are pushing on ahead.

My inclinations and investigations show that they have succeeded in the mighty task of establishing themselves where there was no professional rugby, no stadium, no local affection for rugby. But naturally when discussing their future, other factors come into play. Saracens have a tremendous academy, where lifestyle and life skills are equally as important as the rugby. Saracens do not take youngsters unless they also have another career lined up outside rugby, just in case.

The lineage at Saracens begun on the advent of the professional game and there were some lean years and poor coaching choices, but that changed when Brendan Venter, the fearsomely committed Springbok centre, arrived all those years ago and mentored the young former Ireland centre Mark McCall.

Then Ed Griffiths moved in as CEO, creating a hegemony carried on by the likes of Schalk Brits and the South African element and now with Farrell and the current players, with a powerful line leading right through it.

But as Saracens have found – just like other successful clubs found earlier – to bother recruiting and developing players of international class for England is a double-edged sword. They all go off to international rugby with the blessings of the club, but then when clubs like Saracens assess matters at the end of the season, they find that the players they developed for England are actually appearing in fewer than one game in three at club level. The club game in England will never thrive until that ridiculous situation is alleviated.

But with foundations so strong, back to the current team. There is definitely a rebuild due. As I said earlier, there is a

Master of his craft Owen Farrell (left) savours a drop-goal winner with Alex Lozowski

golden generation which will need to be replaced in the next year or two. Farrell would probably still be good to lead the new Saracens, although with the greatest respect to Manu Vunipola, they do need an expert emerging fly-half – the amazing Goode has filled in recently but a big signing may be needed.

They are not the powerhouse they were up front, as the La Rochelle game showed. Don't forget that Vincent Koch and Juan Figallo on the tighthead were amongst the best in the world in their position when they were winning all those trophies. At present, while Mako Vunipola and Marco Riccione of Italy are playing well, some of the old power and the old depth is no longer there. No one needs to point out that Will Skelton, who simply couldn't be accommodated under the shrunken salary cap in England, was a massive loss. The lock played wonderfully against Saracens for La Rochelle. Is there currently enough power in Saracens' engine room?

The club could possibly look to sign a booming centre, although all the ball-playing members of the current back division have an energy and a tenacity to go with their skills. But in two years' time, the Saracens team will be quite different to that which will appear in this month's Premiership play-offs.

As ever, the production line is humming. Theo McFarland, the astonishing Samoan flanker, was playing out of his skin before he was injured and there is no doubt Saracens have missed him more and more as the season went on. He should be fit to play for Samoa in the World Cup and will be a staple for Saracens for years to come.

They also have other likely youngsters. Cameron Boon is a 6ft 10in lock and if he can add experience and a certain snarl to his game then he can guarantee lineout possession well into the future. Samson Adejimi is a hooker of great promise – he scored four tries in a Premiership Cup match last season.

Josh Hallett and Ben Harris are emerging strongly in the back division and flanker Olly Stoneham is likely to become a regular in the next wave. Hookers to eventually replace Jamie George appear to be coming out of their ears, while Tom Willis (No 8) and Tom Parton (15) transfer in next season.

Furthermore, Saracens coaches are still developing players who are ostensibly past the development stage. For example, Andy Christie, the Scotland back-row, is arguably one of the players of the season and he is a much better player now than he was when he first appeared on the Test scene more than a year ago.

So much will then depend on Mark McCall. A case can be made that he is one of the leading three coaches anywhere in the world at the moment. You sense that had he any affection whatsoever for the earbashing, baleful profile of life as a national coach, then he would be a Test-level coach already.

Joe Shaw and Ian Peel are other pillars of the coaching group who could easily step up to higher levels – just like former Saracens such as Alex Sanderson have done already.

Clubs with an air of permanence are now to be treasured. Not all of Wasps' demise was their own fault and no doubt they will be back at the top level within a few years, but it is still shocking that one of the great clubs and one of the founder members of the Rugby Football Union should be so afflicted that they had to cease operating halfway through the season. That is why teams like Saracens, Leicester and Northampton will always be vital for the English club game and the English national team.

Saracens are changing. They are changing for the better and setting an example. Even with a tremendous academy, there can be no guarantees that the next wave will be as good as the old, in any sport and in any town.

But you sense Saracens will be having a major say in the major competitions at the end of many seasons to come. Red and black magic. RW

International quality Mark McCall

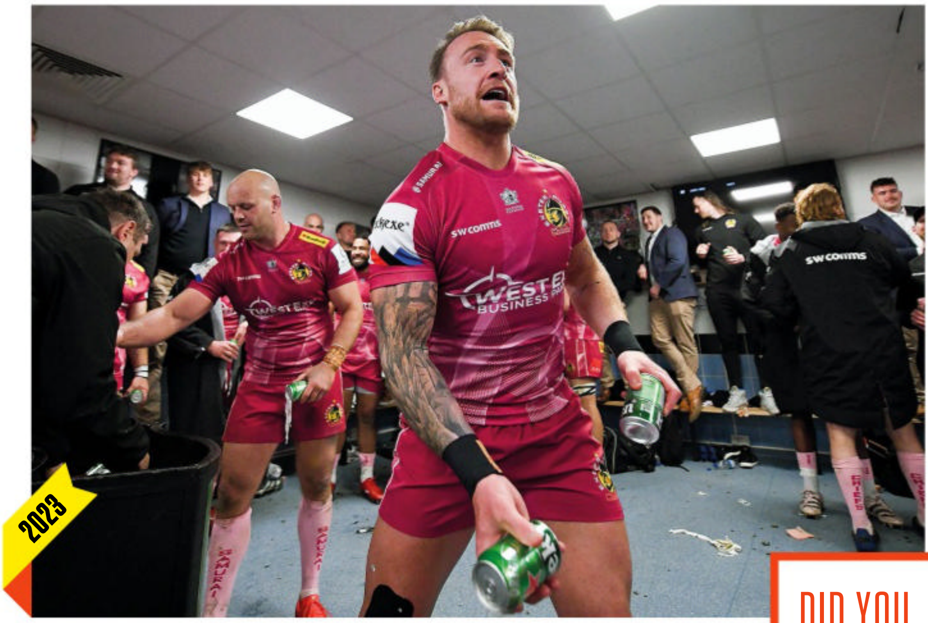
Entertainers Sean Maitland scores against Harlequins

MAIN IMAGE David Rogers/Getty Images. **PICS** Getty Images

MY LIFE IN PICTURES… STUART HOGG

Interview **Josh Graham** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

Scotland's record try-scorer and three-time Lions tourist announced that he will retire after the World Cup. Here are his highs and lows…



TOASTING VICTORY

"This is the best part of playing rugby, being able to share a beer with your mates after the game in the changing room. This is after the Champions Cup quarter-final win over Stormers and as you can see we are a really tight-knit squad. All the players not in the 23 come into the changing room, there's the best part of 60-odd boys and management in total.

"Rob (Baxter) wheeled out the wheelie bin of beers and I thought, as an older head, I'll start chucking them out with Jack Yeandle. This is the bit that I'll miss. I won't miss the nine to five training or how my body feels, but I'll miss game day and the special feeling of enjoying a victory."

DID YOU KNOW?

Hogg's sporting hero growing up in Hawick was champion jockey AP McCoy. As a small kid, Hogg dreamed of following in his footsteps before rugby took over, but he remains a racing fan.

2013

RIDING THE WAVE

"This is photo evidence of my first time surfing in Noosa, Australia on the Lions tour. I was on the board for what felt like ten seconds but it was more like half a second, if that, and then I fell straight on my arse, as seen.

"It was a ridiculous time, I really loved that tour. I was in awe of the players and got to play alongside my absolute hero Brian O'Driscoll against the Combined Counties in Newcastle. I was playing fly-half that day with Conor Murray inside, Jamie Roberts at 12 and O'Driscoll at 13. I was in heaven.

"I was like, 'Yeah, I'll just pass to you and to you…' I had the responsibility of carrying BIL the lion around as the youngest and it went walkabout a few times, so I downed a few beers for that." ➡

WARRIORS WIN

"I wanted to make sure that season was the best I could possibly have, not to make up for the one prior but to show myself I made the right decision (staying at Glasgow).

"That break right there, I made in the first half and passed inside to Henry Pyrgos and he scored under the sticks and we went 21-0 up (before winning 31-13 in the Pro12 final against Munster).

"That was a quality day. We had targeted being the first Scottish team to win a title for a few years and that was the first time I'd won a major trophy in pro rugby and it was absolutely incredible. We worked really hard all season to achieve that and to then do it was the best feeling I've ever had."

2015
@PRO12Rugby

WOUNDED LION

"That was an absolute killer. I was playing some of the best rugby I'd ever played and to get that fracture on the inside of my eye (after colliding with Conor Murray's elbow v Crusaders) was devastating. It took me a good 18 months to two years to get over it.

"All I did was work hard to try and get back to where I wanted to be but I had injury after injury. I had my shoulder reconstructed after the tour, my eye socket was smashed up to bits and then when I came back fit, I popped my other shoulder and did my ankle. That was the toughest thing I've ever had to take in my rugby career.

"One of the three specialists I saw said they could plate it and I might be back in a couple of weeks, but I didn't fancy risking my eyesight, as much as it killed me to come back home early."

2017
Standard Life Investments

PURPLE PATCH

"This score against Ireland is one of my favourite tries in my career. I caught Conor Murray's box kick and decided to take off and picked out Rory Best and Mike Ross in the defensive line. Tommy Seymour ran a line to take Best's eye away from me and I just ran as fast I could to score.

"I loved that game and that season, and you could see that in my performances. I honestly believe 2016 and 2017 were my best years for club and country.

"I just had zero fear and backed my ability. Being the first Scotsman to win the Six Nations Player of the Championship award was pretty special. I think my mum is still paying off her phone bill now!"

GREATEST HONOUR

"The first two games as Scotland captain didn't go well personally but then I scored against Gloucester the week before this game against Italy and that brought my confidence back.

"I scored a belter in this one too, but we only won 17-0 just before Covid. I really wanted to make a difference with the captaincy. It just felt after the World Cup that there was something missing. But we were all leaders in our own way, the only difference was I had 'captain' written next to my name.

"I had a great group around me. I'm a very passionate Scotsman, so to have the opportunity to be captain of Scotland was quality."

2020

CENTURION

"The best moment ever. I knew going into the Six Nations if I was fit and got everything right that my 100th cap would be at home against Ireland. It was just a quality day and the best feeling to share with my wife and kids.

"My eldest Archie brought the ball on and was like, 'Daddy, so if you've got 100 caps for Scotland, does that mean I've got one cap now?' He got recognised after and said, 'Dad, am I famous?'

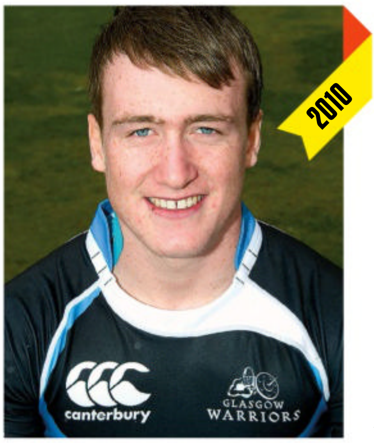
"I'm going to get that photo on a big canvas in the house. On the day it didn't go our way as we got beaten and I snapped my ankle ligaments, but you can't have the fairytale ending all the time."

2023

FIRST TASTE

"This is quality, I've not seen that photo in forever! I moved to Glasgow before my 18th birthday and it was my first taste of pro rugby. I remember getting the photo taken in June in pre-season and I was thinking, 'Why the hell am I getting a profile photo with a Glasgow top on because there's not a hope in hell I'm going to be playing this season'.

"I had two games for Glasgow before I popped my shoulder but it was also my first year back at my home-town club Hawick and I absolutely loved it. What a jersey that is, too. I'll have to get in touch with the kitman to try and get it."



2010

2020

FRENEMIES

"This was the first time I'd ever played against Finn (Russell) and I was incredibly nervous because he's a world-class talent. He knows my strengths and my weaknesses and was trying to pick on me the whole time.

"I ran and grabbed a couple of beers after the game but the best thing about this photo is Jonny Gray was standing just outside the camera frame and he's like, 'Why am I not in it?!'

"Finn's a great bloke. I gave him a big hug before I celebrated with my (Exeter) team-mates (after winning the Champions Cup) because I knew how devastated he was. You smash hell out of each other for 80 minutes and then you're best mates off the pitch."

HOME SEVENS

"It was a weird season because I got red carded in the Six Nations and tried to leave Glasgow to go to Ulster and it all went Pete Tong. I went about it in the wrong way as I pretty much refused to play for Glasgow.

"We went on tour that summer and (then Scotland coach) Scott Johnson asked me if I wanted to go to the Commonwealth Games.

"Straightaway I had a newfound respect for sevens players. I didn't get a huge amount of game time but I loved the experience and it got my love for Glasgow back."

2014

Words **Dylan Jack** // Pictures **Inpho**

STEVEN KITSHOFF

The Springbok hopes to bow out on a high at Stormers before joining Ulster

SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 31 (10 Feb 1992)
Born Somerset West, Western Cape
Position Loosehead
Franchise Stormers
Height 6ft
Weight 19st 9lb
Bok caps 71 (2T)
Instagram handle @steven_kitshoff

BLK
URC FINAL
VS BULLS
18 JUNE 2022
DHL STADIUM
CAPE TOWN
STORMERS
DHL

STEVEN KITSHOFF'S sights are again set on leading Stormers to glory in the URC before defending the Springboks' World Cup title. The URC final is on 27 May, a match the Test loosehead hopes will celebrate the end of his 12-year Stormers career. After which his eyes will be focused on helping the Boks successfully defend the Webb Ellis Cup for the first time.

And what may sound like an ideal ending to a story makes way for the next chapter as he will set up home away from the Western Cape for the first time since 2015, when he started a two-year stint in Bordeaux, by joining Ulster.

DHL
DHL
DHL STORMERS 18
HECAPITAL

Cape crusader
Celebrating Stormers' URC title triumph last year

Kitshoff could be forgiven for feeling the nerves, given his long association with Western Province and Stormers. From watching games at Newlands as a Paul Roos schoolboy to representing the union at U18 level, making his senior pro debut as a 19-year-old in 2011, taking over the captaincy in 2020 and reaching a record number of Stormers caps, every part of Kitshoff's career has revolved around the Cape side.

"It means everything to me," Kitshoff admits. "Except for those two years in Bordeaux, my whole career has been based with the Stormers and WP rugby. They are the main reason why I am where I am today, learning from the senior guys how to play some tough rugby. I'm thankful and honoured to be part of such an awesome union for more than a decade."

Stormers are well placed to give their skipper a perfect send-off, having sealed the battle for the South African Shield in March while Kitshoff was in a Springbok camp. He says a second straight URC title would be "massive" for Stormers after the Cape side had to wait over 20 years for their first cross-continental tournament win.

"It would show the first title was no fluke, that it was well-planned and came from good training and hard work. You can see from our performances that the guys are in the right mindset. It's not about a one-hit wonder here, it's putting in performances every season to be in contention for big trophies.

"We've moved away from defensive pressure and living off turnovers to become a full-out attacking team, still with a great defensive system. We understand that Leinster are almost like Ireland's national team, but just to keep pushing them and trying to dethrone them every season is something we work towards. We want to be the best franchise or club in the world and keep on competing with those top dogs."

Part of Kitshoff's role this season has been to mentor the young front-rows at the union, ensuring the Stormers' success doesn't end when he leaves for Belfast.

"It's awesome to see guys who are willing to learn and work hard, even though they don't get selected every weekend. Having that positive mindset is important. You can see it in guys like Kwenzo Blose, Leon Lyons, Sazi Sandi and Lee-Marvin Mazibuko. They're full of energy, willing to learn and to work. That makes me happy for the future of Stormers rugby."

He adds: "It won't be fun for me, when I start this new adventure with Ulster, coming down to Cape Town to play the Stormers. I know how hard the guys tackle and how physical they can be. I'm not looking forward to that at all."

There will be little pause for thought after the URC season as Kitshoff goes straight back into the Boks camp. The world champions will look to use a shortened Rugby Championship to fine-tune their plans for the World Cup.

And then he will link up with Ulster, one of the powerhouses of the URC. "'There were a bunch of factors that played a role in deciding to join them. The rich heritage of rugby and the way they play was one of them. There was definitely a financial decision.

"I think Ulster is going to be a fun new chapter in my life. It's just something different, with new challenges. I had a long chat with (head coach) Dan McFarland. He has been after me for a while."

Ulster's gain will be Stormers' loss, with coach John Dobson branding Kitshoff as one of the franchise's great servants. "He will leave with our gratitude. He is a true Stormers man who will always call Cape Town home. We're hopeful we will see him back here in our colours one day once his contract in Ireland is up."

In terms of his Stormers legacy, Kitshoff believes he leaves the No 1 jersey in a good place. "I was fortunate enough to get a starting position at a young age and start cementing my position from there. Not to sound arrogant but it comes from hard work and dedication. Through that you can go quite far.

"When you speak about legacy, you want to leave it in a better place than it was. I feel I've given everything for the cause. Blood, sweat and tears, as they say. I've been fully committed every time I've put on that jersey." RW

MY TOP 3 ▼

CHALLENGES

LEADERSHIP
"I try to lead by example by always being in a positive mindset, especially when times are really tough"

SIGNING FOR ULSTER
"With the deep rugby heritage there, it's going to be brilliant"

STORMERS' EVOLUTION
"For the tight five, rugby has become much more of a dynamic game"

THE BIG INTERVIEW

MARLIE PACKER

She is as fierce as ever on the field but there is a softer side to the new Red Roses captain

Words Harry Latham-Coyle ● Main Pic Steve Bardens/Getty

MARLIE PACKER takes a deep breath as she settles deeply into her chair and her new role as England captain, her mind at a whir as she considers a hectic few weeks. Life was already busy enough, balancing being one of the Red Roses' best with parenting a tearaway toddler, but the extra responsibilities that have come since her elevation to high office means spare moments are few and far between.

"It's been a lot more than what I expected," the flanker admits with a chuckle as we speak in the thick of a Women's Six Nations campaign. Leading her country is an honour that means plenty to Packer, but there is plenty to juggle. "It is a big deal and I've come to realise that very quickly. The amount of meetings you have to do, the commercial stuff, press conferences; there is so much more to the role than I ever thought there would be.

"I'm loving it. I'm really enjoying it. The desire to be England captain was always there. It's been a whirlwind and one I feel very privileged about. It might all change with the new coach coming in, players coming back from injury or pregnancy. You don't know what the new coaches will be thinking. But the feedback I've had has been really positive."

umbro
O2

➡ Initially appointed co-captain for the tournament, Packer was one of a few individuals given advanced notice of Sarah Hunter's abdication, sworn to secrecy before the official proclamation. Though the retirement of England's leading lady for the best part of a decade had been broadly anticipated, some felt she might continue on until the end of the tournament, shepherding this England squad to the end of an era with coach Simon Middleton also stepping away.

But the chance to bow out at home proved too tempting. Hunter took her curtain call after one last treading of the boards in Newcastle, leaving her long-time back-row colleague to take up the baton and drive England on as they begin to build towards hosting the 2025 Rugby World Cup.

If the Red Roses wanted a captain to lead by example, then Packer is a perfect fit. A portrait of the openside is easily painted from her personality as a player. The flanker is nothing if not forthright, with a willingness to poke her head into dark ruck recesses and a penchant for an expletive or three. Ferocious in the carry, she is now her country's top try-scoring forward. In 2022, she was named England's Player of the Year – a standout in a team of record-breakers – and inspired Saracens to domestic triumph.

But there is more to Packer than might first appear, a softer centre beneath the teak-tough exterior that will not be immediately evident to outsiders. Speak to Packer's team-mates and they will tell you about their captain's caring side, her arm often placed on sore shoulders.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," Packer quickly remarks when I ask if she sometimes feels like her character is misconstrued. A jesting smile soon drops into a more considered mien. "On the pitch, that is the cover. You don't divulge into that book on the pitch.

"You see me as this fruity-speaking rugby player that will hit anything, pump her chest up, do anything to win and will lead from the front. And I don't expect people to think of me any differently to the player they see on the pitch. The way I play rugby is very much me being me.

"My circle is quite small in terms of what I let in. It's a trust thing. I trust everyone around me to be honest and don't break it. But I have everyone's back on the pitch – you have got my trust until you break it.

"I just want to make sure the group grow. We've got a very young, exciting squad. I want them to be able to express themselves, enjoy it, be brave, and if things do go wrong, not to worry that they are going to be frowned upon or shouted at."

That compassionate side is vital now, with England very much in the grips of change.

> "Rugby will give Oliver so much in life because of what it has given me. I want him to look back and think, 'My mum was pretty awesome'."

Taking the contact
Hammering into Italy

Hunter – described as the “ultimate Red Rose” by her close friend – was for a long time the glue that bound a squad of big characters, ensuring any fractures never widened. As Packer and I speak, a regime change is imminent and a host of senior figures will be absent from England camp.

In the week after the World Cup final defeat to New Zealand’s Black Ferns, Alex Austerberry, Packer’s head coach at Saracens, told this writer that the 33-year-old had already indicated a real desire to push on until the 2025 World Cup, with the chance to be a senior figure at a home tournament obviously appealing to her.

But the decision to continue on was not necessarily quite that straightforward, Packer now reveals to us. The inexorable creep of advancing age threatens even the best and, in the fast-evolving world of women’s rugby, a new generation is coming through fairly quickly.

Even coming off a superlative individual year, doubts nagged. Come 2025, a tournament of real importance for both England and women’s rugby more widely, Packer does not want to be a passenger. “I have a really good working relationship with Alex, not just as my club coach but as someone I can talk to about things off the pitch. After the World Cup, I did speak to him and said, ‘Am I delusional thinking I can make it until 2025? Where do you think I sit?’

“Even though it is a two-and-a-half year cycle until the World Cup, and I’m playing some of my best rugby at the moment, I want to go and still be the best openside flanker, still be the best back-row player in the world.”

There’s a sense of unfinished business after last year’s final defeat, in which England had a last-minute opportunity to beat the hosts but ended up losing 34-31 after New Zealand stole a crucial lineout. While Packer has come to rationalise the loss to the Black Ferns in 2017, conceding that England were beaten by the better team, there is a sense of a big chance missed about last year’s reverse for Packer, wrongs to be righted with a feeling that the Red Roses had let their chance at glory slip at Eden Park.

“New Zealand weren’t the better team on the day,” she says. “We had all the cards against us but we still could have won it. They didn’t win it; we lost that game. I came off pretty early in the second half of that final, and that was the bit that was the overriding frustration for me. That was the bit where I questioned if I was delusional about 2025.

“Obviously I’m getting older but when you get older, you get wiser. The hard work that you put in over the years comes into play. I’m still fit enough, I’m still an 80-minute player. I still do things that other players don’t do so much and I still have the desire to be the best in the world. While I’m still here, I’m not letting up in what I do.

“I see it as a great opportunity to be part of leaving the game in a better place and also leaving a legacy. I’m going to push to be the best I can be and hopefully I can be in that squad. It’s a big couple of years.”

There is an expectation that those couple of years will end up with a Twickenham stadium full to the rafters, which is encouragement enough to go on. But for Packer, there is extra motivation with regards to her son, Oliver. With him at two-and-a-half, he is not yet old enough to understand his mother’s trade but is already toddling about in front of the television with some sense of pride.

Motherhood has given Packer fresh perspective and drive, enabling her to move on from past mistakes and continue to thrive 15 years into her international career. Having a child “changes you massively”, she explains to us. “You can be selfish and think about only yourself, and I probably have done that over the years. When I say selfish, I put rugby first. I’ve missed many social occasions because of rugby. That’s just how I always have been.

“But when you have a child, they come first from the day that they are born. When I am with him, the switch off is instant. I get home and I pick him up and throw him around, and he loves it. It’s a really good balance for me, which I never thought it would be. I’m probably not so hot-headed on the pitch any more either. Push my buttons in the right way, you will see that side of me, but there is so much more to life than rugby since I’ve had Oliver.

“I love my job, I love what I do, and I hope one day he can look back and I have inspired him to achieve anything he wants to achieve. Did I ever think I’d travel the world playing for England? No. Whereas now I’m hoping that I’m doing that not just for young kids but for my own kid as well, showing them you can do anything in life as long as you work hard.

“I want to be remembered as an awesome rugby player on and off the pitch. When I was younger, I just loved playing. There was no background of it in my family. Rugby has given me so much in life, and it will give Oliver so much in life because of what it has given me. I want him to look back and think, ‘My mum was pretty awesome’.” RW

Club glory
Lifting the Premier 15s trophy with Saracens

Applauding the crowd
Packer the captain

PICS Getty Images. **STATS** Correct as of 21/4/23

FACT FILE

Age 33 (2 Oct 1989)
Born Yeovil, Somerset
Club Saracens
Position Flanker
Height 5ft 5in
Weight 12st 4lb
England caps 92
Instagram handle @marlie_packer

In the fast-moving world of elite rugby, how are the complex and isolating emotions of loss and bereavement handled? This is our special report

PLAYING GR

THROUGH

IEF

Words ALAN DYMOCK // Main Picture GETTY IMAGES

SUFFERING LOSS is universal – it touches all of us eventually.

Everyone feels it differently, though. And in a game forever tethered to the notion of being for all shapes and sizes, the vastness of grief is navigated in myriad ways. Nearly every single person interviewed for this special report used a variation of the idiom about there being no handbook, no manual, no playbook for handling loss.

In a recent interview with *BBC Breakfast*, former Leicester Tigers and England hooker Tom Youngs talked of losing his wife Tiffany to Hodgkin Lymphoma. He said: “The loneliness really hits you. It wasn’t until the dark nights came in during the winter time.

“It gets dark here at 4pm. And you start ringing people but it’s still not the same, it’s still not the same as having someone to talk to alongside you.”

With this feature we intend to share some differing stories of grief and loss through our sport, to show the gamut of human experiences – as well as

→

➡ highlighting the help that is out there, and even a positive or two. Our intention is to show the human side of elite athletes. Hey, of all of us…

Dealing with loss

"IT'S DEFINITELY something you think about every day," says Glasgow Warriors and Scotland full-back Ollie Smith.

In 2019, his older brother Patrick fell from a third-floor window during a party in Edinburgh's Marchmont area. He was pronounced dead at the scene. It was earth-shattering stuff. However, today Smith, 22, talks openly and evenly about his experiences.

"You almost start to appreciate other things a lot more and maybe deal with things better, just because of the magnitude of losing someone so close, so suddenly as well. You kind of take everything else with a pinch of salt, it just doesn't matter as much.

"Whether that's with selection or in general, the things that happen in your life, at the end of the day it doesn't really matter, things can always be worse. That's what I tell myself."

Smith talks of differences in brothers' personalities. There was bickering when they were younger. Patrick wouldn't be caught near a rugby pitch. But after Ollie went to boarding school and Patrick to uni, the pair somehow felt closer.

"He became way more comfortable in himself when he went to university, which seems to happen quite a lot," Smith says. "If I ever had to go to Edinburgh for training or whatever, I'd stay on his sofa and we'd have that one-on-one time together, which was quite nice – we'd go out for dinner, stuff like that. And so we really got to a place where we had a good relationship, which was nice to be going in that direction before it ended so abruptly."

Mature Glasgow and Scotland full-back Ollie Smith

When Ollie scored two tries against New Zealand in the U20 World Championship in Argentina, his brother recorded clips of it, and himself, clearly "buzzing". The younger brother doesn't get teary but he'll watch those back now and get a warm feeling, knowing what it meant to Patrick to see him play.

That sense of thankfulness has extended through his life in interesting ways, as he tells us: "I've almost been lucky in kind of stumbling into a coping mechanism that works for me really. And that kind of changed my perspective.

"I remember speaking to my mum a few months ago, walking the dog, and I said that it sounds terrible to say but something like this is the best thing that can happen to you in terms of growing up. in terms of growth and character."

It's important to note not everyone is the same. For example, Wales flanker Dan Lydiate played against Argentina in November, a week after his father John passed away. In the build-up, before it was public knowledge, then national coach Wayne Pivac said: "Dan Lydiate is a special person. This is outside of the rugby player, he's just a top, top person and we talk about putting the team first." The side wore black armbands in John's honour. Clearly the team rallied around.

Smith also tells us of the team-mate who stumbled across a video of him talking at a charity event about loss. This team-mate, he discovered, had lost his mother young. He didn't feel he could open up about it quite yet. And it's

"It was quite hard to pinpoint exactly what was eating me up. I was so, so angry"

Big figure Andrew Porter talks well about grief

Playing on Dan Lydiate

something others have come to explore. In a recent column for *Rugby World*, Leinster and Ireland prop Andrew Porter wrote of his emotions through childhood: "It was quite hard to pinpoint exactly what was eating me up. I was so, so angry. I was feeling sorry for myself, thinking 'why is this happening to me?' after I lost my mother at 12. I thought, 'I'll get through this by myself'.

"By all accounts, I was one of the happiest kids you'd have ever met. But to have such a huge event in my life, with the loss of my mother, that sparked everything. It was at such a challenging time in my life.

"The funeral was the day before I started secondary school. You were thrown into this environment where you felt even more isolated."

Today, as an adult, he's come to realise that his friends, and the sport he loves, helped him through. And now, he wants to talk about it to help others.

Talking out loud

IT MAKES sense there is no consensus on best practice for pulling through, for the homogenous label of 'the grieving'. How do you find a catch-all that suits someone who has lost a lover, a guardian, a child? As Bristol back Charlie Powell, currently with Jersey Reds, says, "This is an individual thing…"

On his experience, he says: "Back in 2018, I lost my mum to cancer. It was an aggressive form called mesothelioma and it happened very quickly.

"The sad thing is my mum never actually managed to get any sort of treatment for it. She was never well enough to go through chemo because of the type of cancer it was, there was no other option for her. I remember very clearly the doctor telling us that there was nothing they could do for my mum and the only question he had for us was: does she want to die in hospital or does she want to go back home? She went from that first visit to the doctor in May (2018) to actually passing within what I think was only a nine-week period."

You know what we mean about every situation being different? For the Powells, they could see the end coming. Charlie cannot tell you how that affected things but it happened. The family pulled together and, much like Smith, the young backs are happy their relations strengthened bonds after adversity. But they acknowledge that is not a given.

Not everyone has a family either. But Powell remembers with a smile the fact his mother, Amanda, insisted that he go on a lads' holiday around the time she was awaiting diagnosis; even when ➡

National tragedy Scotland mourn Siobhan Cattigan

Honest talker Charlie Powell speaks lucidly about losing his mother. 'I'm up front with my emotions'

> "I waited for the boys to be out and allowed myself to cry. I've done it a few times, still do"

➡ she had the results, she didn't tell young Charlie. And that tale leads us to something else, and it's a thing Powell feels is part of the wider discussions we should all be having about bereavement and our experiences.

"I remember going through all sorts of emotions during that time," he says. He tells of the moment the doctor told them there was nothing they could do for his mum, how the end was coming. He felt anger, even though rationally he knows it's no one's fault. But there was nowhere to funnel energy because he couldn't do anything to help. Still, life was changing.

"Timing-wise, Mum just passed away and I was pretty much ready to move out. I signed my first contract and Bristol put me into their academy house with John Hawkins, James Dun and Sam Bedlow. They were all really good with me and I knew they and friends outside of rugby had chats about what they could do for me. And they decided just to treat me like normal. Because I'm still Charlie.

"That was the best thing, and they still gave me banter. But they said to me if you ever want to chat about it, just bring it up and just talk to us. And that was the best thing all my mates did.

"A big bit of advice is just don't beat yourself up if you're going through that roller-coaster of emotion. There is one big thing which is fairly powerful when I tell people. I'm quite up front with my emotions. If I did feel really sad, I'd allow myself to just cry. So I remember living in that academy house, when I waited for the boys to be out, and allowing myself to cry. I've done it a few times. I still do it to this day, even though it's five years on. I'll look at pictures of my mum and just allow myself to get upset about her."

Powell sees it as a relief, allowing the emotions out. But he is also keen on hearing from anyone who wants to talk about their experiences – and has done. He laughs about how, "selfishly", he benefits from the catharsis of talking with others about loss. But it's all sharing.

According to Luke Cheyne, the head of player development and wellbeing at the Rugby Players Association, it is vital to recognise there is a diverse field of experiences when it comes to feeling loss and that elite athletes need a menu of support options. The RPA hope that through their confidential counselling service (Cognacity), via direct contact with player liaisons who can then make referrals, or by other means, they can get members the support they need. The start point, he says, is that every player deserves the same recognition as a human being and that it is okay for them to feel how they feel. But secondly, that the athletes see that they can come to them for help.

Not everyone has the luxury of a players' union looking out for a buffet of issues they might face, though. The Good Grief Trust was set up for this very reason because of the disparate, differing and sometimes hidden nature of bereavement support groups. And so today, they have an online listing of 900-plus charities and groups that can help, depending on your situation.

Linda Magistris set up the trust in 2016 after losing her partner Graham to cancer in 2014. As she explains: "I couldn't cope at all and I struggled to try and find support. So I went to a GP as a

Gone too soon
John McCall, left

first port of call, and I was shocked by the fact that actually he didn't have anything at his fingertips to be able to signpost me to help.”

We suggest that being handed a load of leaflets by someone at the doctor's office may also be overwhelming at an already overwhelming time, and Magistris replies: “Completely. Or it can be the opposite and you don't get anything. You literally have the police knock on the door and they leave you with news of a sudden death or a road traffic accident or potentially suicide, and they do not have any resource. They don't, as a rule, have something to leave you that's comprehensive. So we produce this card you can leave that has the website on it.”

Magistris points out that every 22 minutes in the UK, a parent dies. There is legitimate fear of simply leaving people to find their way through a bewildering time, too. As she adds, there can be “serious consequences if you don't offer support from day one.” That doesn't mean you have to use it but the option should be there.

Losing a team-mate

RUGBY RIGHTLY fears on-pitch tragedy. And an unlucky band have seen it. Just ask Stephen Ferris.

In 2004, at the Junior World Championship in Durban, John McCall took contact for Ireland against New Zealand and never got back up. It was later reported that the talented back-rower had suffered cardiac failure. But in real time, no one knew what happened. The game went on.

In the second half Ireland lost heavily but then came the real blow. As Ferris explains: “We were standing in a huddle at the end of the game on the pitch. And we were told there and then that John had died, on the pitch. With spectators still in the stands. With New Zealand players still walking around and celebrating. It was the most bizarre, peculiar thing to ever come across me.

“Then, within five words, everybody broke up. Boys are on their hands and knees, bawling their eyes out. Like, ‘what the f***'s just been said to us?'”

Beloved by fans
The Youngs family have known grief

Ireland withdrew from the rest of the tournament. Ferris recalls the phone call home, when he was barely intelligible. And in days that followed, his emotions went “up and down, up and down, like a yo-yo”. Cheyne says something similar of grief, that one friend describes it as like being on the waterline of the beach with your back to the tide. You know the wave is coming but when will it hit?

If Ferris has any regrets at that time, it's that he agreed, as part of the larger group, to go to see McCall's body as it lay waiting to be transported home.

He tells us straight up: “If I was given the option again, I wouldn't go anywhere near it. Because the last memory of John I have is of him lying in a box in South Africa – not surrounded by his family, not surrounded by his close friends from home or anything like that.”

HELP AVAILABLE

If you've been affected by any of the issues discussed in this feature and would like to seek help, why not try the following...

ELITE PLAYERS

In England, the RPA provide services through their confidential service Cognacity – cognacity.co.uk or call 0203 219 3080. Player Development Managers are also on hand and can help refer you to the right person with Cognacity, as a first port of call.

In Ireland, the RPI offer a range of services you can find via tackleyourfeelings.com or email wellbeing@rugbyplayersireland.ie.

GENERAL PUBLIC

The Good Grief Trust offers a comprehensive list of services and links to the best place for you – visit thegoodgrieftrust.org to find out more.

For young men, strongmen.org.uk is another good place to go, while in Ireland you can search for bereavement support at HSE.ie, for general advice.

If you have any questions about the issues covered here, please reach out at rugbyworldletters@futurenet.com

What was the support like back then? It's tough to say. People do the best they can with the knowledge they have and the resources available. However you cut it, this was horror scenario stuff.

The people of Ulster rugby would know tragedy again, when in 2012 centre Nevin Spence and his father and brother perished in a slurry accident on the family farm. As team-mate Ferris explains, as an adult he was better equipped to understand what happened than he was as a teenager back in 2004. Yet there was that yo-yo again…

What he can say is there was greater access to support from trained professionals, but he also recalls the team linking together to catch anyone who needed help. There are stories of colleagues who felt like they had to say something – the group listened.

"Maybe something like that does bring you closer together," Ferris ponders. It is a great unanswerable. Because there was quality in that side and they finished top of the table in the regular season.

Honouring the fallen Ulster remember Nevin Spence

KUKRI
SPENCE
The Belfast Telegraph
ULSTER Rugby

There will be mosaic accounts from a sports team who have lost one of their own. We are all still coming to terms with the loss of Scotland's Siobhan Cattigan. The former Scotland forward died suddenly in 2021 and in interviews her family have called for an external investigation into her time on national duty. While *Rugby World* has reached out to some who played with her, those affected will have their own processes – the hope remains that there is access to help and that dialogue can be opened up for anyone who needs it.

"A sense of loss of identity that they've probably had since their mid-teens is similar to grief"

But what can we learn from the world of psychology, and how it pertains to rugby union at the toughest level?

Tackling the feelings

"'SHOULD' IS a very challenging word in this kind of process," says Mark Smyth, the lead clinical psychologist with Rugby Players Ireland. "Because that sets up expectations, whereas it is unique."

The key messaging for Smyth and RPI for the last few years, when it comes to athletes' mental health, is around early intervention; for players to pay attention to their emotions. If your typical centre felt a niggle in their hamstring in training, they would seek some medical expertise. This group want players to do the same with their mental health.

As he tells us, "If you're in crisis, absolutely come to us and we will provide you with whatever support you need. But it's much more effective if we can intervene before it gets to a crisis point. And rugby players are quite pragmatic. Many of them like solution-focused approaches. So it kind of makes sense to them. But it's not always easy either, to go and seek help.

"So one of the things that we've been trying to do through workshops with each of the provinces and the sevens and women's 15s teams is to explore player experiences of help-seeking and also around challenging stigma and myths around mental health. But also, as individuals, how would they like to be best supported – not just by ourselves with professional services but by each other, with your own colleagues."

That pragmatic side is an interesting topic to explore. Because as soon as you tell top players or coaches that something can affect performance out on the grass, people pay attention.

In a previous issue of *Rugby World*, we told the story of Portugal's attempts to qualify for the Rugby World Cup. After losing to Spain in the Rugby Europe Championship, head coach Patrice Lagisquet felt the need to apologise to his team because he felt he hadn't offered the right energy to his players in the build-up. A dear friend of his had passed away suddenly the week before and the coach felt floored by it.

That is a real-game case study of someone's performance being affected. At least that's how they saw it play out.

However, so much of our focus has been on the loss of a person. And from a psychological point of view, Smyth opens up a discussion on a sense of loss many athletes will know of.

"Traditionally, when we talk about grief and loss, instinctively we would go to the loss of a loved one," Smyth starts. "But what I find interesting is when it comes up as a theme with professional rugby players around two different transition points.

"The first one is around career-ending injury at an early point. That's when someone has to give up on their dream of maybe playing for their country, winning a European Cup – they're on a fast track to being a superstar and then it's just taken away in an instant.

"And that impacted a sense of loss of their identity that they've probably had since their mid-teens. The hopes that they've had, the loss of their dreams, is very, very similar to grief.

Impacted
Patrice Lagisquet

"A similar process occurs in retirement, where you no longer have a sense of identity that's been there longer, a more core, rooted identity has come to an end. A player might become a parent and they've then got to consider future career prospects. That transition point can feel like quite a loss as well until the player gets a new sense of identity with a new direction in their life."

It's something the RPA have a lot of conversations about too, with Cheyne and wellbeing and transition manager James Bailey at the forefront of those chats. As Cheyne tells us: "Interestingly, we've spoken with a lot of the players who have come through the whole debacle at Wasps and Worcester, who liken some of the process of going through that as like dealing with the loss of a loved one. Of, well, grief.

"We've got players in that room (when they heard of the loss of their club) who were at the start of their career. And some will sense a loss of their career – there will definitely be players in that room who won't play in the Premiership again. And those are the players who have had to go in and do various different things."

Back in Ireland, Smyth shouts out the 'Tackle Your Feelings' campaign where top-end stars have allowed themselves to be vulnerable, publicly. The idea is that if anyone from the grass roots or wider society can take anything from that, it's a success – which is where the likes of Andrew Porter talking up comes in. And the programme has since been rolled out into schools, with the scheme specifically targeting children aged 14 and 15 with their messaging.

Smyth concludes on this that the aim is "providing them with the skills to literally tackle their feelings as they occur, and not expect that they will just sort of figure it all out for themselves. So I think that that's been really helpful, a real positive over the last couple of years. And we're hoping in the next couple of years that we'll have a lot of quantitative data that will help us to actually evidence the positive impact."

Ollie Smith offers some thoughts on avoiding bottling things up, telling us that he believes in owning the grief. He never expected to lose anyone so young – no one does. But he has since talked to others who lost loved ones years ago who still will not talk about it. The working theory is that they never did, and things have dragged on. "It can be so detrimental," he offers. "And if you don't have a tight-knit group, then it can sort of spiral from there."

Once again that doesn't mean we need mandated talking slots for all. What many yearn for is just that the *option* of support is there from the off, and that athletes are aware. Hell, not just athletes.

No one promises a cure, a catch-all or a roadmap. Sadly, there is no bypassing what is coming. But as figures like Charlie Powell say, you shouldn't feel guilt over what you do or don't experience. There is something poetic about us all sharing the inevitability of something but the feeling of it being different for all. RW

Working with players
The RPA's James Bailey

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

GLASGOW
WARRIORS

Warrior Spirit

WORDS **TOM ENGLISH**
//
MAIN PIC **ASHLEY ALLEN/GETTY IMAGES**

After plummeting in standards, Glasgow have been transformed by coach **Franco Smith** this season. Here's how he turned things around...

AT THE end of March, in a display that made locals in Limerick gawp in shock and possibly awe, Glasgow Warriors laid waste to Munster at Thomond Park in the United Rugby Championship. Scoring four tries in the first half and accelerating into a 28-0 lead, the stuff they produced was borderline cosmic. They ran with elan. They were thunderous, ambitious and lethal.

That win came after Glasgow put 50 on Zebre and not long before they put 70 on the Dragons in the Challenge Cup. It was the continuation of an unbeaten run that was more thrilling than anything Glasgow had delivered since the halcyon days of 2015 when Gregor Townsend's team stormed to a Pro12 title.

Fraser Brown, the veteran Glasgow Warriors hooker, tells a story about his coach Franco Smith and the endlessly

➡

➡ whirring machinery in the brain of the former South African ten. It occurred in the midst of all of those victories.

Brown says that Smith contacted him in the week of the Munster game in March and said that he'd woken at 2am with different ideas for ten different players in his squad, things that came to him in the night and which he wanted to impart, pronto. His vision for Brown was something about making the Glasgow lineout more dynamic and "quicker, quicker, quicker" as he put it.

"The first thing that struck me," says Brown, "was him waking up at 2am with loads of ideas in his head. That's pretty impressive. The second thing was the clarity of the message. Franco knows his own mind. He knows exactly what he wants. Complacency is his great fear and he does everything to make sure it never creeps in. It's exactly the kind of standards that we let slip last season.

"We were so written off at the end of last season, rightly so. Totally merited. When you saw what we were putting out on the pitch it was so frustrating and you can't help but have self-doubt. Some boys would have been asking if they could produce it at this level anymore..."

Brown and all of the older Warriors at Scotstoun could give you chapter and verse on the dog days of the end of last season, the run of defeats, the collapse in standards, the utter disintegration of confidence and, in some cases, hope. "I'll never forget it," he says, "but at the same time it feels like another lifetime compared to where we are now."

The 35-10 loss to the Scarlets, the 32-28 loss to Cardiff, the 32-7 defeat to the Stormers followed by the 29-17 defeat to the Bulls. That was only for starters. Then there was the loss in late May to Edinburgh which teed things up perfectly for the *pièce de résistance* of haplessness – the 76-14 humiliation against Leinster, a mortification so profound that when you mention it now to anyone, you are met with a heavy sigh and a forlorn shake of the head.

Midas touch Franco Smith clutches the 1872 Cup

PICS Getty Images, Inpho & SNS Group

Keen Bean Second-row Lewis Bean crosses for a try against Dragons at Rodney Parade

"I was on the touchline and it was a dark, dark place," says the Warriors manager John Manson, who played for Glasgow at the back end of his career in the late 1990s and who was manager when they won the Pro12 in 2015.

"It was just a horrible day. Everybody was suffering. The players seemed tired, the staff seemed tired. The trip to Leinster was the end of it. There was not one person who felt detached from it. Danny (Wilson, formerly head coach) lost his job and we all felt responsible.

"We had to look in the mirror. Franco didn't come in until block two of pre-season, so we had the whole off-season and block one to reflect. It was actually good not having a head coach in that time because everybody had to step up a little bit. Nobody could just look into the head coach's office and say this is for you to decide. Everybody took a step forward in their own field and when Franco came in he had a solid platform to build on."

Those were deeply troubling times for Glasgow. Wilson went and everybody at Scotstoun felt partly guilty about that. This was the failure of the collective, not any one individual. It was a mess.

The Glasgow support, a great strength on their best days, became disaffected. With the performances of the team, the ticket prices for the coming season, the lack of new talent coming through the door. The relationship was tense. Very few Warriors fans saw the appointment of Smith as the panacea. He was low-key when they wanted high profile.

"We had a fans forum at the start of the season and there was a lot of unrest, on and off the pitch, fuelled by results and how far we'd slipped," says Manson. "We didn't shy away from that. Big Al Kellock (former captain and now managing director) dealt with it head-on. Nobody was pretending it was okay. Covid separated us from our fans and our community and that was something else we had to restore. The boys have been very proactive about getting out there and rebuilding that connection that was lost."

In December and January, Glasgow looked like a team that was turning a corner and then the debacle of Rufus McLean, one of their young Test players, detonated. McLean was suspended and then sacked in utter disgrace in January when pleading guilty to the domestic abuse of his partner. It was, to put it mildly, a challenging time.

Smith might not have been the coach some fans wanted but he's proven to be precisely the coach that they needed.

"He just loves rugby," says Brown. "He is a student of the game. He's 24/7 but doesn't impose that on us. Out of hours, you barely hear from him. When you're not here he wants you to switch off.

"I didn't know much about Franco apart from his spell with Italy and he was also in charge of the Cheetahs when we played them one year. There's always a bit of trepidation with a new coach because you don't know what you're going to get. As a player, it doesn't matter who you are, whether you're just in the door or whether you've been here for 15 years, you still have the fear factor, still have that need to prove yourself. Nobody thought 'Oh s***!' or 'Oh great!' We just desperately wanted him to take us in a good direction.

"We were so disappointed in

DID YOU KNOW?

Franco Smith's son – Franco Jr – plays in the backs for Zebre Parma. He qualifies for Wales as he was born in Newport, and for Italy on residency.

Thumbs up
No 8 Jack Dempsey celebrates scoring v Ulster

> “Our footwork has improved. All our props and second-rows, instead of running straight, there’s a little bit of expression”

ourselves last season, just generally gutted. We knew that our standards were nowhere near where they should be. It’s easy to say that but it’s difficult to rectify. It’s not just about one person waking up in the morning and going, ‘That’s not good enough’. We’re talking collectively, a 45-man squad, coaches, staff all doing it. What we did last season wasn’t acceptable and we needed to do something about it.

“Franco would say that it made his job a bit easier knowing that he had a group of players that weren’t looking to blame anyone else. He had a squad of players eager to improve. We knew we were nowhere near fit enough, nowhere near strong enough. We did a lot of work on strength and conditioning, a lot of work on skill-set. Our footwork has improved. All our props and second-rows, instead of running straight, there’s a little bit of expression beforehand. That’s why we get quick ruck ball to play with.

“You see it when you watch Leinster, you see it when you watch Ireland. Every single player carries it in two hands, shapes both ways, takes it to the line and has options. Straightaway you empower every player to play, to be a decision-maker. You build a reputation. Other teams know that Glasgow are going to keep playing, that we’re not going to fade away.”

Smith has gone deep into his player pool in the URC and Europe this season and it’s how lesser lights perform that has really built the foundations of the recovery. In a word, it’s about trust and there’s no better example of that than the Challenge Cup game away to Bath.

Richie Gray and Scott Cummings are the go-to second-rows, but Smith went for JP du Preez and Lewis Bean as his locks. He had Cameron Neild and Jack Mann in his back row instead of Matt Fagerson and Jack Dempsey. Jamie Dobie started at scrum-half over Ali Price and George Horne. He had other inexperienced players on his bench.

There was a fear that by showing faith in his squad players he would risk losing an important European game, but his team delivered and the feelgood gained from that was significant.

“He’s done that quite a lot,” says Tom Jordan, the Kiwi fly-half who’s made a big contribution this season. “Franco’s done a brilliant job in managing his squad and giving opportunities to everybody so we all feel part of it. Look at that Munster game. Sione (Tuipulotu) and Huw (Jones) were voted the centre partnership of the Six Nations but our midfield that night was Stafford McDowall and Sam Johnson and they tore it up. That’s happened all season.”

Since their dramatic improvement – the return from injury of openside Rory Darge was a godsend – Smith’s side have been love-bombed for their ability not just to win games but win with style. The supporters are lapping it up.

“Franco has to take real credit but he hates taking credit,” says Manson. “He gets a bit embarrassed when you give him praise. He puts me back in my box whenever I get too excited. He says we have a long way to go and that getting to the next level will be incredibly hard because of the quality of the sides we’re facing. And he’s right. We’ve improved but we’re not where we want to be. There’s a big road to travel yet.” RW

■ *Why Glasgow Warriors will bring verve to the play-offs, pages 90-91*

SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 23 (31 Mar 2000)
Born Guildford, Surrey
Position Second-row
Club Saracens
Height 6ft 5in
Weight 19st 3lb
Instagram @hughtizard

Words **Alan Pearey** // Pics **Getty Images**

HUGH TIZARD

Saracens have helped the budding lock become a more complete player

PLAY-OFF TIME, *plus ça change*. Saracens are there again, their 12th time in a row if you discount the two seasons they were sidelined for cheating the cap. A year ago they brushed past Harlequins but a young opponent caught their eye. This time second-row Hugh Tizard is lining up for Sarries.

Jamie George called him an "absolute steal" when they signed him and the affection is mutual. "I'm loving it here. I've no regrets at all," says Tizard. "I've enjoyed moving house, great lads, they've welcomed me so well. I'm loving the rugby we're playing and loving how successful we've been."

Tizard was often used as a strike runner off lineouts at Quins, and hugely effective he was too. But it meant sacrificing his education in the lineout, something that has changed since his switch of club.

"It's been better for me that I've been doing the lineouts all year. I've learnt a lot from Maro (Itoje) around the set-piece. He'll go through my jumps with me, I'm learning techniques. Hopefully it's becoming an area that in a few years can be a real strength of mine. Defence too he's a massive help, learning little tactics he has."

Perhaps there have been fewer attention-grabbing moments but the former Cranleigh School pupil is maturing. Forwards coach Ian Peel is his main port of call and Tizard calls him "outstanding". He has lost a few kilos, down from the 127kg he was a year ago, to help cope with the increased demands.

"The intensity we train at is a lot harder at Saracens. Particularly on the unit side of things. Scrum and maul, we do a lot more reps. I'm fitter, stronger, and I've developed my overall understanding – defensively I've improved in that regard. I feel a way more complete player. I had a slow start but as the season has gone on, my involvements have picked up."

Tizard took up rugby at the age of seven at Old Guildfordians. His dad, Jeremy, played at Old Wimbledonians and was smitten with the game. Young Hugh was always going to play. "I didn't really have a choice! But I didn't enjoy it. I got cold and frustrated every Sunday morning. My dad would walk away and watch my sister play, he was too embarrassed to see me standing on the edge with my hands in my pockets."

Fortunately, his enthusiasm grew, and father and son would watch Wasps at Adams Park, where Hugh's favourite player was Joe Launchbury. Hugh liked soccer, too, supporting Liverpool on the urging of a godfather. "My idol was Steven Gerrard (right). He'd be worth 200 million today."

At 17, he helped Guildford win the National Colts Cup, scoring a crucial try against York. "We had a fantastic team, U18 academy players, U16 internationals. In the final, I scored one of my best tries ever. It was only from about five metres out but I managed to put some footwork on for once!

"Andy, our coach, came to work at the local state school (Guildford County School) that I was at for a while. It was brilliant to have someone who knew about rugby. That's a massive area that could be improved. We had great PE teachers with great football knowledge but they lacked rugby knowledge. That's probably the case with a lot of state schools."

Tizard signed his first contract at 18 and two years ago he was at Twickenham when Quins won the Premiership in breathtaking fashion against Exeter. "I was travelling reserve and sat on the bench with the actual subs. It was an amazing last 20 minutes, then an amazing three, four, five days of celebrating. It was the best day I've ever had in rugby."

He thinks rugby has progressed since he joined the pro ranks but remains frustrated by the frequent stoppages to review decisions.

"Rugby needs more fans, more engagement, and having a 120-minute game, with half of it not being rugby, that's not going to help it at all. I like what they're doing with the 'orange' card. If there's a clear high tackle, give a yellow and let the TMO decide if the player can come back on or not. But don't waste time."

Saracens will be stretched in the play-offs. Injuries have taken a toll, most notably on Billy Vunipola. "He's a talisman and carries 20 times a game. It's a big hole in our team, that guaranteed go-forward. I'm sure there will be ways we can try to fill his boots but it's easier said than done." And his Player of the Season at Sarries? "Elliot Daly. Until he did his hammy in January, he was unplayable."

One imagines Tizard will join them in stepping up to Test rugby, but not yet. He made one of Eddie Jones's England squads last year and spoke to Steve Borthwick just before the Six Nations. "He said he didn't think I was ready and gave me some work-ons."

Tizard is grateful for the advice and eager to learn. Saracens have another good 'un on their books. RW

Rising clamp
Taking command v Exeter

MY TOP 3S

MOVIES
The Big Short
Doctor Zhivago
Inglourious Basterds

STADIUMS
Twickenham
Stade Marcel Deflandre
(La Rochelle)
Stade des Alpes
(Grenoble)

SPORTS
Rugby
Golf
Football

CASE FOR

BORN IN Wigan and with a successful rugby league career behind him, it's no wonder Wales fans were drawing comparisons with Shaun Edwards when Mike Forshaw was appointed as Warren Gatland's defence coach ahead of this year's Six Nations.

But Wales are a long way away from the glory days that Edwards and Gatland presided over. Having left Sale Sharks after a decade, Forshaw is certainly up to the challenge that lies in wait ahead of this year's World Cup.

We asked the 53-year-old about the Six Nations, his defensive philosophy, the influx of league coaches and his friendship with Ireland's Andy Farrell...

THE DEFENCE

Words **JOSH GRAHAM** // Main image **MICHAEL STEELE/GETTY IMAGES**

Mike Forshaw is the latest former league player to become Wales defence coach – and here he outlines his vision

➡ You've just had your first Six Nations, so how did you find it?
It was a bit different for me. I went in pretty hot from coaching three-quarters of a season with Sale and just coming out of two European games. So jumping straight into the Vale resort on a Sunday night and meeting 40 new players on a Monday was a bit of a challenge as you can imagine. Not that it daunted me.

Eight or nine weeks in camp with the players and trying to earn trust was a big one and that works both ways, I think. I really enjoyed it. You've got to have some enjoyment as a player or a rugby coach. I got frustrated at times.

I thought we played particularly well in the second half of the first game against Ireland. I thought we did alright in the first half against Scotland but dropped off in the second half. We seemed to struggle when we played back-to-back weeks and that's something that as a staff we will talk about going forward. From a physical point of view, where we need to be before we hit the World Cup.

What is your relationship with Ireland coach Andy Farrell like?
He's one of my best mates. We both have conversations about rugby. There's a very strong friendship there and it is a professional one. We have conversations about each other, what we do well, what do you think of that? There's a really good relationship from a rugby point of view because we go back a long way.

> **“Andy Farrell is one of my best mates. We take the piss out of each other on holiday in Devon”**

There's a big family connection there as well as a friendship group. We've watched Saracens together, obviously his son is there. I'll sometimes go and meet him down in Devon at his holiday home. We will have a few social days down there, me and my wife. We might talk rugby but more often than not we are taking the piss out of each other.

I've got a lot of respect for him, he's done a remarkable job (with Ireland). And it's probably England's loss. It's incredible when you think of all the staff that left them and where they are now. It's quite mind-boggling really.

You've got to have belief that if you lose your job then it's not the end of the world. I remember he came to a Sale game just after he lost his job with England and he said, “I'm meeting Joe Schmidt next week.” Joe Schmidt was a really big name in rugby union and the first thing he must have thought was, ‘England have let him go and I'm going to make sure I go and get him'.

Is there pressure to follow in the footsteps of Shaun Edwards as a fellow Wiganer from league?
No, it worked the other way for me really because I actually referenced Shaun, somebody who I go back with a long time.

I said if I can do half the job this fella did then I'll have done alright. I'm not going in with any pressure, I'm totally different to Shaun. He had some great years there and is doing a great job in France. It's up to me now to put my own stamp on it with the new staff and obviously there's been some challenges along the way.

The only thing I can focus on is the players I get and trying to improve them. Getting them to get some real enjoyment in not having the ball, the tough moments in games and pressure, because I certainly do.

What do you do when there are no international games on?
I'm just getting used to that, to be honest! I'm trying to cast my eye over some potential Wales World Cup mini camp players and I also had a week away in Lanzarote to see some friends.

I'm just trying to keep up to speed with all the players who I've not met yet really and look at what they are about by watching them. I went to Ospreys against Saracens and Judgement Day (all four regions played at Principality Stadium on 22 April). I'm looking at all the individual clips of players I've not coached, so just downloading games.

League lads Forshaw tackles Farrell, 2004

Red wall
Taking it to Ireland

What are you looking for when watching players play at their clubs, like in Ospreys v Saracens?
I'm looking at how the Ospreys play and what fits the player. I'm also looking at how players thrive in that environment against a good team in a European game, which is probably just a tier lower than Test-match rugby because it is higher than club football.

I'm looking at individuals because the analyst gave me some names but I obviously knew quite a few. Dewi Lake is somebody I've not coached yet who is quite a crucial asset in Welsh rugby as a hooker and someone we want to keep in Wales. He was somebody in particular who I wanted to see off the bench.

Owen Watkin, the centre, I wanted to see him. Alun Wyn Jones and Adam Beard at the set-piece and anybody else who caught my eye really. I thought the loosehead Nicky Smith gave Saracens problems and made a few line breaks.

I'll have a few things in my head and then I'll go back to the analyst and say, “I've only seen them in one game but what has their recent form been like over the last season or two?”

How important is the role of an analyst?
Over the last 14 years I've done a lot of that work myself, I always have done. But at international level, the one thing I've noticed is that it's a huge step up in X-factor and cutting edge.

Wales have always been renowned for having great analysis

FACT FILE

Age 53 (5 Jan 1970)
Born Wigan, Lancs
GB Tests 14
Honours Challenge Cup, Super League
Teams coached Warrington Wolves, Wigan, Connacht, Sale Sharks, Wales

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

staff. A lot of them have regularly been with the Lions with Warren. I think they are really, really important and a massive part of the jigsaw to be successful and to get the players up to where they need to be. I don't need to give them names, they've already got everything ready to go on their desktop.

How much time is spent looking at players on the fringes of the squad?
That's what I'm doing at the moment and obviously the analysts have a big part in that because I might speak about a player and they'll say he's probably a bit down the pecking order.

I've got about 16 players who I'm really focusing on and watching deeply. Not just from a defensive point of view but what is their effort like? What are they doing off the ball? Because it's not all about defence. When you get whole teams that are good at defence, you know if they are going to score three tries, then you've got to score four.

It's important that I look at how they chase kicks, what they are like off the floor, what they are like physically – when the ball goes away from them, are they still in the game? Have they got that feel? There's quite a bit I would look at. Some of the players have been in the squad before, but there might be a couple of bolters that come into the squad which I'm really excited about.

What is your defensive philosophy?
The first part is earning trust in what I'm trying to coach. I'm very fortunate to come from a team (Sale Sharks) where I've worked over the last ten years, with the material they had there. We prided ourselves on our power game and our physicality with the South African input.

With Wales, it's probably a bit different. I want to make our defence a bit of a power game. I want there to be a big shift in mentality, particularly around set-piece defence. That is something they've had a taster of but is something I'll keep driving. If I can get the intention there, then we will be doing well. I've probably put them in a position where they've not defended like that before, so that's going to take a bit of a time.

The best thing about a World Cup camp is it becomes a bit like Club Wales rather than Six Nations Wales because we have quite a bit of time together to grow as a team. I'm excited to get my defensive system across. I'm a big believer in small conversations, it's not all about on the field.

I don't always talk about defence with a player. I like to know a bit about what is going on, what he does and what he enjoys. With the experience of coaching, I think that's important and it brings that trust I'm talking about – you want them to work for you.

Why do so many defence coaches come from rugby league?
I think it's probably because as a rugby league player, the biggest emphasis was always on defence. As a kid growing up in Wigan, the first thing they teach you to do is tackle. So there's always a mindset around it.

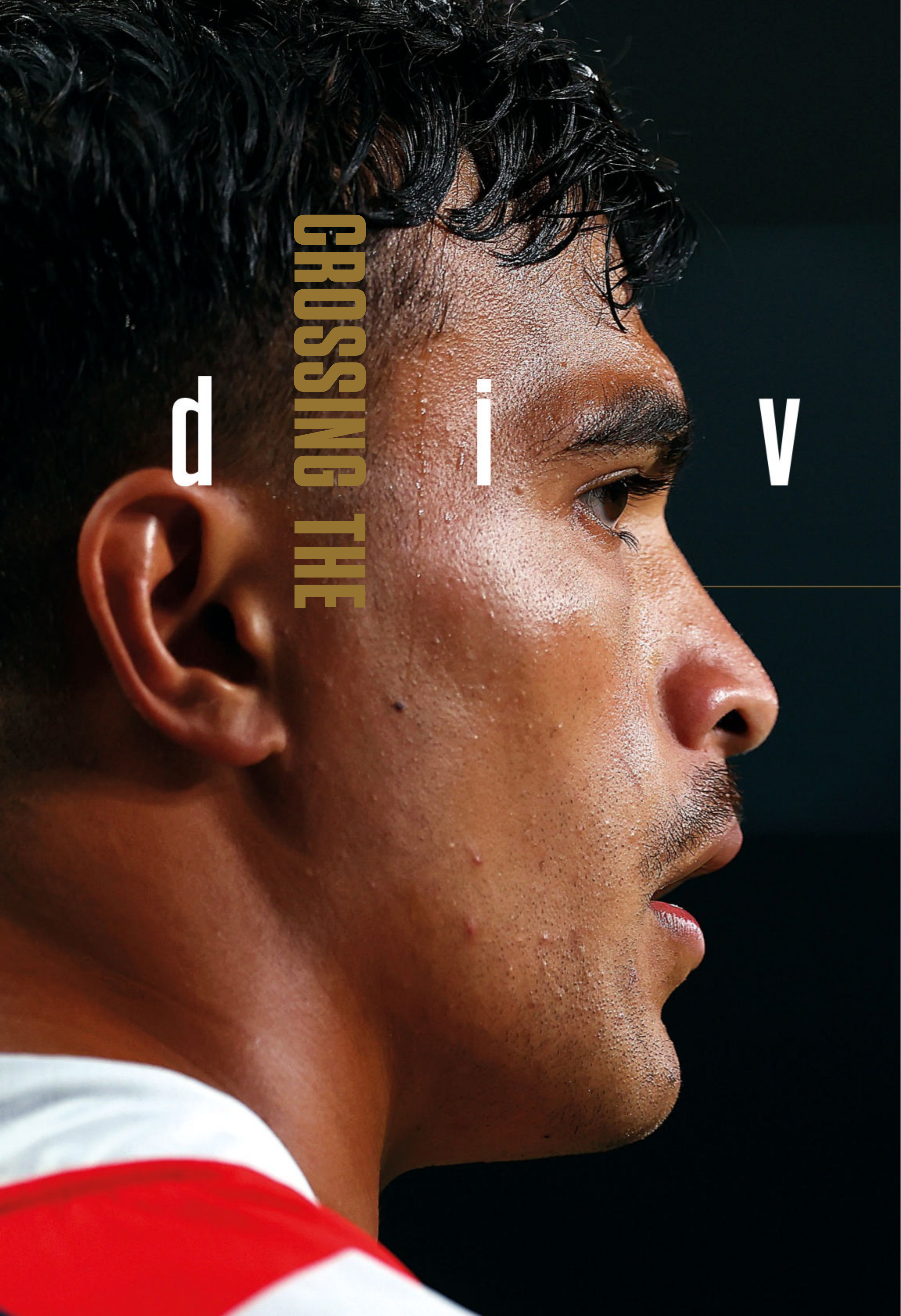
I know many years ago, from Mike Ford, Graham Steadman and obviously Shaun (Edwards), they got into big jobs quite early. Steadman and Ford worked in Ireland. But now I think there's a bit more prestige about international jobs. I would like to think that not many league defence coaches would get jobs in rugby union at the moment.

I think if a club wanted to appoint a defence coach, they'd appoint someone who is working in rugby union and not go to league. I think union has really self-developed so that they can produce their own coaches in each area.

I went to Connacht in 2010 with Eric Elwood. That was probably the best apprenticeship I could have ever had. Then ten years at Sale. I think I earned some stripes before getting this job and I'd like to think whoever walks into international jobs has done the same.

Last line
Louis Rees-Zammit against France

Dump tackle
Mason Grady on Alex Dombrandt



CROSSING THE div

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Words **JOSH GRAHAM** // Main Pic **MARK KOLBE/GETTY IMAGES**

Rugby Australia scrapped hard to attract **Joseph Sua'ali'i** from the NRL over to union. Is the 19-year-old talent worth the fight? We find out

EVERYONE WANTS a piece of the next big thing. Yet few have gone to the same lengths as the photographers that crawled through the school bushes just to get a single snap of a teenage superstar named Joseph Sua'ali'i.

Such was the esteem with which the Penrith-born prodigy was held that Sua'ali'i didn't even have to be playing. His mere presence at the side of the pitch was enough to summon the press to a rugby union game at The King's School, Parramatta amid the pandemic.

"You've got to understand these kids don't come around often," explains Stuart Woodhouse, the director of rugby at Sua'ali'i's alma mater. "There's a lot of external pressure and I think the school handled it really well to give him a normal life. They were crazy times. ➡

➡ "Press creeping into the school and all that kind of stuff. That's how silly it was. Covid played a big part. He'd be at games watching when he was injured and they were trying to get photos of him and he had to deal with that."

Why all the fuss? Well, Sua'ali'i excelled at the 15-a-side game from the day he joined on a character scholarship aged 13. "He was over 6ft and it was a man playing against children," Woodhouse says, of the first time he saw him play.

"It was not a mismatch necessarily by size as he wasn't a big man at around 70kg back then. But just his skill level and his thinking was way above other boys. His training age would have been at least ten years above his cohort."

You could be forgiven for thinking that a boy so supremely talented might have become disengaged among his far less capable peers. Not Sua'ali'i.

"He didn't get bored, he just loved playing with his mates," surmises Woodhouse. "And the team never lost when he played." That helps. Of course, even if he was the type to get frustrated, it wouldn't have required much patience as he shot through the age groups.

In fact, King's had to request special dispensation for the 15-year-old to play 1st XV rugby. Something the Roosters would later do to ensure he could make his NRL debut before his 18th birthday.

Sua'ali'i captained the South Sydney Rabbitohs in league and made a name for himself as the best U16 in New South Wales by winning the Harold Matthews Cup Player of the Year award.

His booming pedigree in both codes made Sua'ali'i the subject of an almighty tug of war. Rugby Australia and the NRL's top clubs circled like vultures to secure his signature. Hence the fanfare.

Game face
At the Roosters

In the end, Sydney Roosters won the race but not before agreeing to a 'get out' clause. Which explains why we are where we are today: Sua'ali'i has signed for Rugby Australia from late 2024. It also hints at the character of the man. Smart, mature beyond his years and not afraid to make big decisions.

"One of the things that strikes you with Joey is that he is very measured in all these decisions," adds Woodhouse. "He had some really big decisions to make in the last few years of school. But he never came out and made statements and never made a quick decision. Everything was well thought through.

"When he was 13, his maturity struck you. He had his own vision of where he was going to go with things. I'm not sure whether that was a learned behaviour, but he was very intelligent in that way.

"When you're a generational player at 16 or 17, people notice. He took a lot of weight on his shoulders in pressure."

"To have that much talent and apply yourself that well, you are only going to be world class"

A 6ft 5in teenage star with significant aerial prowess who attracted interest from multiple codes. Where have you heard that before? The similarities between Sua'ali'i and Israel Folau are striking. One just hopes that the former's time with Australia finishes on a far more savoury note.

Folau may have been sacked by the Wallabies for homophobic social media posts, but he reached out to Sua'ali'i before he'd committed to the Roosters to offer his counsel, familiar with the conundrums brought on by having so much on the table so soon.

While later Folau had no choice but to switch to Tonga to further his international ambitions, Sua'ali'i turned down Mal Meninga's Kangaroos and opted to represent his father's nation of Samoa at the Rugby League World Cup last year. It caught many by surprise, with the youngster already pencilled in on the wing for Australia.

However, he was not alone. His move came amid a wider trend that saw NRL stars pledge their allegiance to their Pacific Island heritage. Typically, Sua'ali'i took his time to make the decision and is said to have made the call very late on. Not that Samoa were complaining.

Captain Junior Paulo was thrilled to have him in the squad. "He is massive (for us), I think the progression that he has shown in rugby league and just how mature he is for his age is great. He certainly carries himself quite well," the Parramatta Eels prop said at the competition's launch last autumn.

Samoa made the final for the first time before succumbing to Australia, and it was in no small part down to Sua'ali'i's contributions. He was particularly influential in the 20-18 quarter-final win over Tonga in Warrington, getting one over his old school pal Will Penisini.

Half-back Anthony Milford said it was just the beginning for his team-mate. "He's building. He's only going to get better, so the sky is the limit for him."

Coach Matt Parish was singing from the same hymn sheet. "He's got a remarkable career ahead of him if he can stay injury-free. He's got all the tools. He's certainly got the drive and he's certainly got his head screwed on."

Samoa sensation
On the run v Tonga

PICS Getty Images

While Sua'ali'i's on-field exploits were plain for all to see, Roosters colleague Victor Radley labelled him "a freak". It was the daily dedication to all aspects of his craft that impressed Parish's Samoa assistant Lee Radford the most.

"He was the last off the field at training and then he was meditating and reviewing through his mind what had gone on in that session," the former Castleford coach tells *Rugby World*.

"That's something I found really unique, for a young player to have that mental preparation and to be that diligent. To have that much talent and apply yourself that well to your job, then you are only going to be world class."

Up until Sua'ali'i turned his back on rugby league in March, you could hardly find anyone that had a bad word to say about him. That changed when he signed a deal worth a reported $1.6m per season and put pen to paper on a move to the Waratahs.

Phil Gould, Canterbury Bulldogs' general manager and rugby league personality, told *Channel Nine*: "Every time he scores a try, every time he does something in our game, people are going to refer to the fact that he's going. Why do we need that? Go now.

"Don't let the door hit you on the arse on the way out. Go. Go now. Gone. He's made his decision."

Radford couldn't disagree more. "He's a young bloke making a name for himself, why would he go now? He's contributing massively to what Sydney Roosters are doing at the moment. I don't understand that criticism."

League's loss is Eddie Jones's gain as he looks to transform the Wallabies from no-hopers to contenders against the British & Irish Lions in 2025 and in the 2027 World Cup on home soil.

Aerial prowess
Fit for a full-back?

The former England boss took his home nation to the final the last time they staged the World Cup down under in 2003, with league converts Mat Rogers, Wendell Sailor and Lote Tuqiri all part of the squad. So, was working with Jones and what's in store a pull?

"He's always had a love of rugby (union), there's no doubt about that," says Woodhouse, who has coached the Philippines' XVs side for ten years.

"But there's no doubt Eddie, the Lions and the World Cup will have played a part in him coming back. Presenting that to Joey would have been a big plus."

Now that the signing is out in the open, the biggest question remains: where will Sua'ali'i play? He's made no secret of his desire to play full-back at the Roosters while also starring at centre and wing. He played all three in union at school and in reality, would likely excel anywhere from 11-15.

There appear to be two schools of thought: full-back or centre. Ability in the air v potentially more ball in hand.

One of the Wallabies' greatest full-backs, Matt Burke, doesn't think he should wear No 15. "I reckon he would be a massive body at 13," he says. "A good runner of the ball with a good step. He would get his hands on the ball there, more so, and complement the people who are around him."

Radford, whose stint as Dallas Jackals' defence coach was thwarted by Covid, agrees and even favours a move further infield. "I think centre, probably inside, would be my go-to. To play full-back, kicking out of hand is a really high priority and I've not seen him do much."

Whatever number is on Sua'ali'i's back come October 2024, you can expect him to make an immediate impact. Unlike Folau and other league converts like Sam Burgess, Sua'ali'i is well versed in the sport and just needs to adjust to the rigours of a new professional code.

He had represented his state in no fewer than six sports by age 13, so that ought not to faze him.

Woodhouse thinks his proficiency as a basketballer helped mould his offloading. And he still holds the Australian U12 high jump record (1.78m).

But it's this new leap of faith that will shape Sua'ali'i's legacy.

FACT FILE

Age 19 (1 Aug 2003)
Born Penrith, NSW
Position Full-back, centre or wing
Club Sydney Roosters, then NSW Waratahs from October 2024
Height 6ft 5in
Weight 15st 6lb
Instagram handle @suaalii.joseph

“HE IS AN

EXA

Banco de Chile
umbro
kunstmann
energy club
SUPER RUGBY AMERICAS
RHINO
SONRI
umbro

MPLE”

Bound for a first-ever Rugby World Cup despite a horror injury, Selknam and Chile flanker **IGNACIO SILVA** is a poster boy for those who never want to give up a dream

Words FRANKIE DEGES ★ Pics SRA/GASPAFOTOS

SNAPPING AN Achilles when you are over 30 years old could well be time for a high-performance player to think about what comes next in your life.

However, with the chance of taking another shot at qualifying for the Rugby World Cup, Chile forward Ignacio Silva decided to continue working hard.

The dream became reality and the flanker was one of the heroes that put *los Cóndores* in their first Rugby World Cup ever, when beating the USA Eagles a year ago in a never-to-be-forgotten home-and-away series.

With the injury coming a year earlier, in 2021 as Chile were battling through the South American qualifying process, he somehow instinctively knew that his commitment to a long recovery process would have a silver lining attached.

For a player that first represented Chile U20 in 2008, Silva is not only one of the best-known players in his country but stands for all that is good about the game in the country.

“Being able to come back from such a difficult injury and being there to constantly support the team whilst he was recovering shows who he is,” says Pablo Lemoine, the wise coach who led his country, Uruguay, to RWC 2015 and then coached Chile into France 2023.

“His commitment and presence as a leader has been great. We

Silva lining
Carrying for Selknam

➡ certainly wish to find players in Chile with his playing ability; the way he plays for and defends his country and team is second to none."

Lemoine played against Chile many times as one of best front-rowers from Uruguay in his heyday; he coached against them from 2012 to 2015. "When preparing *los Teros* to play Chile, we always had to keep an eye on Silva."

A SKATER AND snowboarder in his youth, Silva had not come across rugby while growing up. In years gone by in Chile, youth rugby was played in the English schools system.

Silva was also prone to picking up a fight. "I liked physical contact," he says. Eventually Silva was invited to Stade Français, a multi-sports club in Santiago.

"I loved the game of rugby straightaway, starting at hooker and soon becoming a loose forward. I found that rugby helped me calm down."

He quickly understood that given he was on the heftier side he needed to work extra hard, but he has never been shy with his physical preparation.

> "It hasn't been easy, constantly challenging. One time we had a full training match at 7am!"

With the closest ski resort about 45 minutes from the city, and three more within an hour-and-a-half drive, changing his passion has meant not snowboarding for almost ten years.

"I don't miss it as rugby makes me happy. And the knocks both on the slopes and skating were hard to take."

LUCKY TO play in a very strong age-grade team at his club, international doors opened for Silva three years after first picking up the ball. Chile hosted the inaugural IRB U20 Trophy and, new to all, the preparation process lasted almost three months.

That first experience was frustrating as he only played five minutes in the de facto semi-final against Romania. He would have a bigger role a year later in Nairobi, Kenya, where Romania took revenge and prevented the young *Cóndores* from reaching a second final.

Captain José Larenas, Pablo Huete, Nicolás Herreros and Silva are, 14 years later, all hoping to be in France.

"Kenya gave me the motivation to keep playing at the highest possible standard," says Silva. "I was fascinated by representing my country overseas, the anthem, the connection, the kinship."

That team is still in contact through a WhatsApp group, *Lo Prometido es Deuda* – 'promises are debts'.

IN A small rugby-playing community, Silva was also a member of the champion side which accelerated his debut for *los Cóndores* towards the end of the 2010 season, when jumping from the bench early in the game to win his first cap against Tonga. In a country with regular fixture lists, he would be nearing the 100-cap mark. He has yet to play his 40th Test for Chile.

In those days, far from the professional set-up he enjoys as he winds down his career, it was up to the individual and his hunger. So much so that whilst playing for Chile Sevens, a casual conversation with future All Blacks boss Scott Robertson when he was coaching Brazil sevens led to Silva and three Chilean players moving to Christchurch to play a season with Sumner RFC.

"I loved it there, the way they live for the game. We would go to watch Super Rugby and if I have to imagine what the Rugby World Cup will be like, I guess it will be that but much, much bigger," he smiles. "We would have lunch regularly with Scott, a really great guy," he says of the golden boy of New Zealand rugby.

CHILE WERE never close to gaining qualification for the World Cup over the years. Their stumbling block was always Uruguay.

Despite the years of putting the body on the line with little joy, Silva continued to be a beacon for the game in his country, pushing his limits to defend the red jersey emblazoned with the condor, the largest flying bird in South America, that inhabits the Andean mountains.

Clubs were not always supportive of a federation whose structure was almost unhinged, even though they had the aptly named Rugby High Performance Centre (CARR) in the Andes mountains.

Time, losses and the desperation "not to miss the train", as current president Cristian Rudloff once mentioned, pushed the arrival of Pablo Lemoine.

"He brought a new message," recalls Silva. "Some didn't understand him and only those 'soldiers willing to fight' stayed the course. It hasn't been easy, and is constantly challenging. One time we had a full training match at 7am!"

ONCE TORMENTOR of Chile in the scrum and then as *Teros* coach, Lemoine's second formal game in charge of *los Cóndores* was against the touring New

ENA
10
Latam
NOBLE CORRAL

Smells like team spirit The Selknam franchise enables Chile's best talent to play together regularly

Latam
NOBLE CORRAL
universal assistance
umbro

Zealand Māori. The big defeat spoke loudly about what was wrong.

After a week's rest, and even if the season was coming to an end, the squad was summoned to train at 6am. Many fell by the wayside and those with similar attitude to Silva's stayed on. The promise, which was ludicrously ambitious, was a place at France 2023.

SILVA LEARNT early on what professionalism was, in the sevens. The Olympic sport has different funding and opportunities. "It was for the love of the game, but we learnt that for results you have to do the hard work."

As the Americas Rugby Championship came to an end – the regular matches against Uruguay, Canada, USA and Brazil – the Superliga Americana de Rugby, and its evolution into this year's Super Rugby Americas, started in 2020. The new Chilean franchise, Selknam, had a win in Montevideo and a loss at home before Covid-19 interrupted.

Special permits to continue training in isolation as a national team would pay off, and in 2021 a narrow loss in Canada was followed by a big win at home. Silva snapped his Achilles, so that big World Cup leap was missed. Chile had a year to prepare for the series against USA.

"The injury gave me the opportunity to release some steam and enjoy time with my daughter Colomba, now almost 20 months old. My partner Francisca was also important in my recovery."

His desire to be involved never waned and he was slowly brought back in the Superliga, with Lemoine rewarding him with a place in the squad. Whilst no longer in the starting XV, Silva was still an integral part of *los Cóndores*.

The series against America is part of folklore. Silva played a few minutes at home and started in Denver as Lemoine gave the starting XV in the opening Test the opportunity to close the second – a masterstroke. "The whole week in Denver was perfect, something I will never forget," Silva now recalls.

Despite his macho image on the field, Silva was unable to watch the match-winning penalty kick by Santiago Videla. "I just couldn't," he says. Adding: "It was by far my favourite day in rugby. I've never cried so much in my life."

THE SINGING of the anthem that day has stuck with Silva, but expect similar fireworks in France.

The game is still not big in Chile but people know they are playing in a World Cup. As Silva says, "A barrier has been broken." Yet, the expected influx of private funding has not come, despite Chile Rugby announcing huge, government-funded developments.

It is improbable the World Cup will yield any wins as they face Japan, Samoa, England and Argentina.

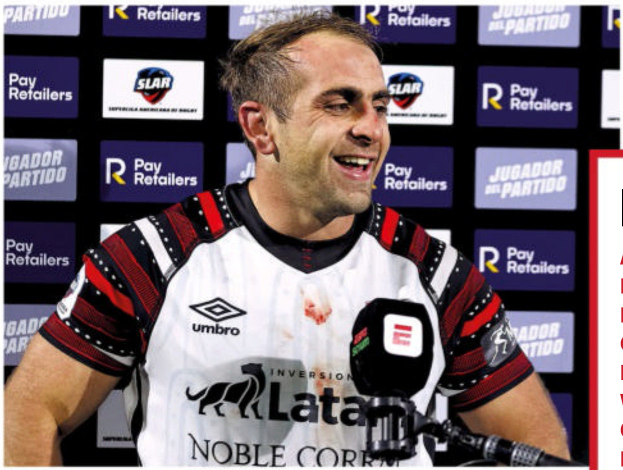
"We've never played a Tier One Test, so it will be challenging. Japan and Samoa will try to play with speed, as will England and *los Pumas*, who I guess will be more dynamic in what they do."

It can be argued Chile have qualified a cycle early, but Silva says: "I like leaving a legacy for Chile, that what I did helped put us in a World Cup. That it happened early has been a huge motivation for us."

His goal at 34? "Be as well prepared and play the best rugby I can, so that I can walk off with my head held high."

A new generation might be ushered in for *los Cóndores* next year, but Silva wants another year with Selknam, then to help Chile's rugby beyond that.

"If I had to describe Nacho," closes Lemoine, "I'd say he is an example."



Post-match raconteur Silva is all smiles during an interview with ESPN

FACT FILE

Age 34 (16 Feb 1989)
Born Santiago
Position Back-row
Club Selknam
Height 6ft 1in
Weight 15st 6lb
Chile caps 39
Instagram handle @ignaciosilva7

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1 Kebble's a broken man playing for Gloucester (3,5)

7 - - - Ionians, National League Two club from East Yorkshire (4)

8 *Ireland getting closer to achieving - - - , says Brian O'Driscoll* – 2022 *Irish Mirror* headline (3,5)

9 Member of Folkstone's vets team – what a fuddy-duddy! (6)

10 - - - McMillan, Saracens and Scotland lock who studied law at Glasgow (6)

11 - - - Synman, Zimbabwean second-row at Leicester Tigers (3)

12 The knockout - - - of this year's Rugby World Cup starts on 14 October (5)

14 - - - Moore, Saracens and Ireland back-row (5)

16 Club in rural Kent that's hosting a barn dance this month and a 25th anniversary ball in July (3)

18 Overturn throne at Weston-super-Mare club (6)

20 Nickname acquired by Hampshire club Fawley after a post WW2 influx of staff from a local Esso refinery (6)

22 Central European nation ranked 77th in the world – they lost 56-7 to Cyprus last October (8)

23 - - - Finn, Ireland wing of 1980s whose sports shop in Cork closed in 2020 (4)

24 "I'm not a believer in - - - as the last game doesn't do anything towards the next," said Richard Wigglesworth (8)

DOWN

1 Prevent opposition from scoring (4,3)

2 Pretoria-based team on the charge? (5)

3 Rob - - - , Ulster winger (6)

4 - - - Pifeleti, Tongan-born hooker for Saracens and USA (6)

5 London Cornish's social team – highly ranked? (5)

6 Jack Nowell owns a - - - F-Type, a luxury sports car (6)

13 Swiss city that is home to Switzers Touch Rugby (6)

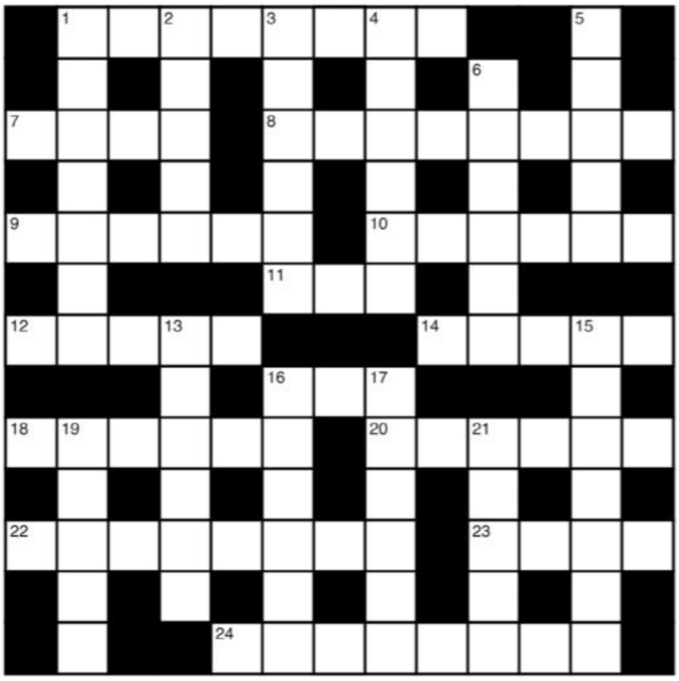
15 See 19 Down

16 France prop who copped a three-match ban for a high tackle on Ireland hooker Rob Herring (6)

17 - - - Lyne, WRU president from 1906-47, abandons a chore (6)

19 And 15 Down. England lock facing a race against time to make the World Cup after dislocating his ankle (5,7)

21 The RPA called for a - - - of 30 games a season to reduce injury risk (5)



THE WINNER OF THE APRIL CROSSWORD IS
DAVID PETRIE FROM GLASGOW

ACROSS 1. Matson 4. Switch 9. Tempest 10. Logan 11. Haul 12. Josh 13. Ray 15. Naps 16. Wrap 19. Alf 21. Gaël 22. Daan 24. Lucio 25. Osborne 26. Yellow 27. Unreal. **DOWN** 1. Matthew Carley 2. Tom Dunn 3. Open. 5. Will Hurd 6. Tiger 7. Henry Arundell 8. Stoop 14. Spagnolo 17. Prairie 18. Decoy. 20. Focal 23. Oban.

The crossword winner receives £20. Closing date for entries is Tuesday 30 May and the result will appear in our August 2023 issue. One entry allowed per household. Send your entry, name & address and an email address to: Alan Pearey, China Cottage, Kenwood Mews, Outwood Lane, Horsforth, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS18 4HR. Alternatively, email your name & address plus a photo of the completed crossword to alan.pearey@futurenet.com. The competition is open to all ages. Compiled by Alan Pearey.

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Pillar of strength
Andras Bardos wins ball in the 29-22 derby win v Annecy

PICS @Jolypics

Team of the Month **Servette of Geneva**

SWISS RUGBY is riding high, their national side at a best-ever ranking of 27 after winning the Rugby Europe Trophy.

Playing their part in that success is Servette Rugby Club of Geneva, whose senior side contains Test wings Lucas Heinrich, Hadrien Bobillier and Gaëtan Moser, and blindside Antoine Salino.

Servette's origins go back to 1890 but football gained precedence and it took current president Alain Studer and a couple of friends, Marc Bouchet and Didier Fischer, to "reactivate" the rugby branch of the club in 2014. Since when they have been promoted every year.

There are about 50 rugby clubs in Switzerland but only Servette play in the French leagues. "We thought it would be a greater challenge for the kids to play in the French competition," says Studer, a former international who in 2001 became the first Swiss Barbarian.

Swiss bliss
Scrum down

With men like Laurent Bouchet, Andras Bardos and Damien Jourdain in the tight five, and Lucas Chouvet and Jérémy Scalese in the backs, Servette recently finished second in their pool of Fédérale One – France's fifth tier – to qualify for this month's play-offs and another shot at promotion. About 40% of the side is Swiss, the rest being mainly locally based Frenchmen.

Partnered by Helvetia Environment Group, Servette are striving to become a zero-carbon club, have a string of 'fair play' awards to their name and work tirelessly at promoting the game in schools. The club caters for boys and girls from the age of three upwards.

"We think we can educate a lot of people through rugby," Studer adds. "I'm proud of what we've achieved. We want to keep growing rugby, the club, through the values that we hold."

Bien joué Servette, our final Team of the Month this season. Next month we'll reveal our Team of the Year in our champions section – don't miss it! RW

GET IN TOUCH

Email stories and pics to Clubs Editor Michael Austin at **aus231@aol.com** or call 01400 282189. Team of the Year entries to **alan.pearey@futurenet.com**

Edinburgh star ‘Boff’ a big hit on all fronts

Tom English talks to one of the game’s most positive influences, Puma Emiliano Boffelli

EMILIANO BOFFELLI and his pal Nacho sit in front of us, Boffelli as the Edinburgh and Argentina player, Nacho as the smiling translator who nods admiringly as his mate navigates the English language in an increasingly impressive manner. Boffelli’s determination to improve is a hugely endearing quality. Later he would ask for the audio of the interview, so he could pass it on to his English teacher to give him feedback on how he did.

He starts by talking about home. He was born and raised in Rosario, birthplace to the revolutionary Che Guevara and the footballing deity Lionel Messi. “It’s a lovely city, a river running through it, a beautiful place with lots of things to do,” says Boffelli.

“It’s a city that loves football. We have two teams, Rosario and Newell’s Old Boys. Messi was Newell’s Old Boys and so was I. I played for them until I was 13 or 14 years old. I love the club, I love Messi. I remember watching him playing in the 2014 World Cup final and then crying after we lost to Germany. Then I cried again when we won. I still put it on the television now and watch it.”

Boffelli was one of the finest attacking players in world rugby in 2022. This has been a turbulent season for Edinburgh – “very disappointing but we’re already thinking about next season” – but for his national team, well, it’s been quite a ride.

Last summer, Boffelli scored 19 points in the deciding Test win over Scotland. In the Rugby Championship he scored 16 in defeat against the Wallabies and 18 in victory against the same side, including a try. He scored 20 in the Pumas’ first-ever win against New Zealand in New Zealand and 25 against England at Twickenham (with a match-winning try) in a 30-29 thriller. England had beaten them ten times in a row before that.

Boffelli was Man of the Match against the All Blacks. His goal-kicking was significant for them that day. “I was never the regular kicker but I love the responsibility. After that game I remembered the bad moments we spent with the team and how good that victory felt. I got quite emotional. My family went crazy. My friends, my amateur club in Argentina. I have good memories from that game.

FACT FILE

Age 28 (16 Jan 1995)

Born Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina

Club Edinburgh

Position Back three

Person you’d most like to meet I love football and Lionel Messi is my hero

Describe your personality Quiet. I like being with family and friends and I’m very lucky. I’m happy

Favourite film *Gladiator*. I went to Rome two months ago and I was crazy for the city

Book *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle. I think about the World Cup a lot and it’s not good for me as I get anxious and can’t sleep. So that book is good

Team-mate you’d like to be Agustín Creevy. He’s funny, he makes me laugh

“I watched the football World Cup final with all the Argentina boys at Glasgow. It was great at 2-0, then it was terrible at 2-2, then I cried when we won. It was the best final in history”

“The first time the Pumas beat the All Blacks (in 2020) I was injured. All of the injured guys said we have to be on the field the next time it happens. Last year was an incredible year”

“Beating England was another special day. I scored the try but I just had to run. It was my team-mates who made it. The last time we beat them at Twickenham was in 2006, so it was very special. Playing for my country is everything to me. I come from a rugby family and it’s incredible. My brothers played for our club, Duendes, and I grew up watching them. Being a Puma is a privilege.”

Argentina and England are in the same World Cup group. Boffelli doesn’t want his mind to drift beyond what’s right in front of his face – the upcoming Rugby Championship – but it’s hard.

The England win was momentous but he says it will mean little by the time the World Cup comes. “England have a new coach and will have more cohesion by then. They will be a very dangerous

"When the Jaguares finished I had to find another team. I joined Racing in Paris but I never really played. It was a bad time. Edinburgh have put the smile back on my face"

opponent. We had some fantastic wins last year but need consistency. After beating England, we lost to Wales and Scotland. Nothing is easy."

When his old club Jaguares ceased to be, Boffelli had an ill-fated spell at Racing 92 before he got his mojo back with Edinburgh. He's confident they'll bounce back after a dismal season. "My team-mates have been so good to me and I love the fans and the city," he says.

When you ask him for his favourite moment in rugby, he doesn't hit you with his Pumas debut or any victory last year. He talks of an amateur game he played when he was 18, the final of the Torneo Regional de Litoral in 2014, in Rosario.

"My brother, Simon, is 17 years older than me. I never imagined when I was growing up that I could play with him for Duendes, but he waited for retirement so we could play together for our club and we were champions. That was amazing. When I go home I always go to the club and see my friends and spend time with them in the club. We're close.

"I played in the Super Rugby final against the Crusaders in 2019 and we lost, but it was an amazing tournament for us. I'd put that in second place with the wins over England and New Zealand last year. But I'm hoping there might be a new first place at the World Cup this year. That's the dream." RW

NEWS ROUND-UP

- **Farewell** Edinburgh are saying goodbye to 13 senior players at the end of the season. They include four internationals in Damien Hoyland, Jaco van der Walt, Henry Pyrgos and Nick Haining.

- **Prolific hooker** Ulster's Tom Stewart (below) has the record for most tries scored in a URC season, after surpassing the previous best of 14 held by ex-Edinburgh wing Tim Visser and Cheetah Rabz Maxwan. Stewart moved to 16 with a hat-trick against the Dragons.

- **Job swap** Springboks head coach Jacques Nienaber will leave his role after the World Cup and join Leinster. He will replace Stuart Lancaster, who is joining Racing.

- **Crossing the bridge** Scarlets have signed Welsh international Ioan Lloyd from Bristol Bears. The 22-year-old utility back won two caps under Wayne Pivac in 2020.

PICS SNS Group & Sportsfile/Getty Images

Resettled Flo charts Saracens success

Sarah Rendell finds a fly-half enjoying a new lease of life after things turned sour at Wasps

FLORENCE WILLIAMS had conversations with Saracens head coach Alex Austerberry last summer about joining the Premier 15s champions, but she decided to stay at Wasps. She had played for the side since 2018 and was "pretty settled".

Then Wasps went into administration in October and a consortium bid was accepted that only included the men's team and youth academy. With the uncertainty around the club and Williams wanting to focus on her rugby, she agreed to move to Saracens. The signing was announced in November.

"It was a tough decision to go because a lot of those team-mates are good friends," the fly-half says. "I discussed it with my team-mates more than with my coaches, so they could understand why it was and I wasn't jumping ship. I'm 28. I only have so many years of my career left and if I stayed I would not be doing it for myself but to help the team.

"I need to make the most of how much longer my body can take doing a full-time job *and* playing rugby, which is tough. I needed to be in an environment where the hours I give to rugby I would be focusing purely on rugby, rather than off-field politics and other scenarios we were having to deal with at the time."

It has since been announced that Wasps will not have a place in the Premier 15s next season. Williams, who has been capped for Wales, says she was "disappointed" to see the lack of support from the wider Wasps club.

"It is really disheartening for a club that has been at the forefront of the women's game for the past 35 years to not be part of the future of it, especially when it does have a male counterpart team which looks like it will have a future in the game," Williams says. "It's not as though it was all on the women to stand up by themselves and work it out; the opportunity for the men to have a women's team stand beside them for the next ten years was there to be taken.

"I am really disappointed in the lack of backing the wider club has given the women's team. I think it was quite telling when the men and academy teams would be looked after for the future but no mention of the women. That story has been muddled as 'the women will be okay'. We were 100% affected by what happened and a lot felt the impact immediately.

"The women's side was and could still be one of the most promising aspects of the game. They've decided not to put their efforts into that. I understand it's a complex situation, but we felt our place in that moment and it wasn't a priority."

When putting this criticism to Wasps, a club spokesperson said: "When Wasps men were relegated, we lost ownership of the professional women's team who are part of the Premier 15s.

"As part of our recovery plan we are including the women and the men's academy. It's our ambition that if we get the men's team back into the Premiership, we'd then be in a position to run a professional women's team too."

FACT FILE

Name Flo Williams
Position Fly-half
Age 28 (27 Oct 1994)
Born Chatham, Kent
Country Wales
Nickname Flo or Flowy
Describe your personality Optimistic, elaborate and observant
Player you're closest to outside Sarries Gloucester's Lizzie Goulden
Favourite film *Remember the Titans*
Job outside rugby I'm a women's sport lead for *Make it Matta*, a sports agency
Why is it important to highlight women's sport issues? If you have experiences you think aren't fair, if you say nothing you can't be annoyed when nothing changes. There are battles it's right to stand up for

Did you play other sports growing up?
"I did a bit of javelin. I thought I was good, went to a county championship and realised I wasn't"

Who's your childhood rugby hero?
"Quade Cooper. His highlight reels dominated my YouTube for many years. I spent a lot of my Friday and Saturday mornings getting up at 6am to watch him play for the Reds in Super Rugby"

Who's your toughest opponent?
"Claudia MacDonald. Very, very competitive, very quick. If she could beat you in a handshake she would! She wants to win everything"

Williams is now part of a Saracens squad holding a top-four place in the Premier 15s and her role at the club has become more significant as regular fly-half Zoe Harrison is injured. Williams has played at ten for crucial matches, including Sarries' 36-27 win over Gloucester-Hartpury, but she is aware the battle for No 10 is ongoing.

"Obviously we have Holly Aitchison so the fight isn't over," she says. "But I don't see it as a fight. Being able to go to training and being able to learn from those players, it's great to see how they operate, how they prepare for games and how they run a game – it is only making me a better player.

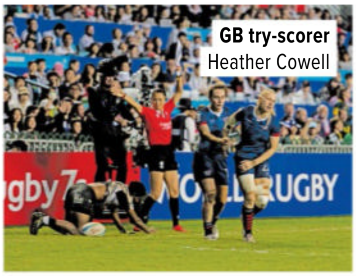
"Being able to shadow the likes of Zoe and Holly in training and to step up and fill their shoes when required has been a great experience for me. Even in a training environment, you are being pushed by some of the best players in the world, so it drives your standards to be right up there alongside them.

"It has been a tough time for Zoe but within a week of injury she said, 'How can I help?', helping with analysis. She even gave me some shoulder pads which I feel bad about! But it's about trying to make the environment welcoming for everybody. We want to win another championship and whoever is on the pitch is going to be part of doing that."

NEWS ROUND-UP

Big day The Premier 15s final takes place on Saturday 24 June (kick-off 3.30pm) at Kingsholm and tickets are available to purchase via the England Rugby website. It will also be shown live on the BBC, BT Sport and Premier15s.com.

Podium finish GB women earned their first podium finish of this season's HSBC World Sevens Series, finishing with a bronze medal after defeating Fiji 22-19 in Hong Kong. Welsh flyer Jasmine Joyce scored two of the tries.



GB try-scorer Heather Cowell

Showdown in Ontario Ottawa will host Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the USA this July in the 2023 Pacific Four Series, a cross-regional international women's tournament.

On the rise Portugal leapt five places in the world rankings to 24 after beating Germany in the Rugby Europe Women's Trophy.

PICS Matt Impey & NurPhoto/Getty Images

“It’s all the same guys, competing for big bucks”

We hear about the incredible NYC Sevens and its $1m prize pot

WE’VE SEEN a few false dawns when it comes to a winner-takes-the-prize, one-day sevens event. But on 15 July, the New York City Sevens will take place at the 25,000-capacity Red Bull Arena with a prize pot of $1m (around £803k) up for grabs for some of the biggest names in the sport – like New Zealand, Fiji, South Africa, France, Australia and the US.

The hope is that this “Hong Kong Sevens-style party” can usher in vibrant times for a new World RFL competition – an elite sevens league. Nestled in a window where they could generate some serious buzz, with Test 15-a-side outfits preparing for the Rugby World Cup and no major club competitions to eat up their audience, there is more than a little intrigue about the project.

And what sets them apart from other ambitious sevens league concepts is that this one has international blessing and is sanctioned by the US Olympic governing body and USA Rugby. As Sean Verity, the World RFL’s executive producer, tells *Rugby World*: “It’s all the same guys you see in the Olympics, competing for big bucks.”

There will be so much going on. According to Verity, there will only be six minutes between matches at the Red Bull Arena. But they want a festival feel around it all too, with junior rugby activiations, likely wheelchair rugby, and they hope to innovate with broadcast.

Rugby World understands that the prize money is coming from private investment, but there are also positive noises about what comes next.

World RFL founder and commissioner William Tatham has been making moves in rugby for years and said: “Rugby is the world’s contact sport and the ‘father of American Football’. I’m committed to making the World RFL the next major US league and the first new American professional sports league in 50 years to truly prosper.”

On the ticket
New Zealand and France

“It’ll take things to another level here in the USA”

But on top of that, Ross Young, CEO of USA Rugby, said: “Rugby sevens is a unique experience in so many ways, the festival and entertainment atmosphere are unlike any other. NYC Sevens aims to enhance that with a blend of top-level rugby, music and culture. With some of the world’s best men’s teams descending on Red Bull Arena this summer, it will take things to another level here in the USA.”

We saw the Sevens World Cup come to San Francisco in 2018 and it worked incredibly well as a one-off, with an estimated 100,000 coming through gates in the Bay, but there were costly moves to get USA rugby to that point.

We’ve also seen the Las Vegas Sevens come and go, and although it was not retained as a Sevens World Series leg, it has a rich legacy.

Rob Cornelius, head of operations for NYC Sevens, added: “As a leading promoter of the Las Vegas USA Sevens, the most successful sevens event in the US, we’re excited to be a part of the World RFL’s premier kick-off event by introducing Olympic-calibre rugby sevens to New York City.” We will watch with interest... RW

DID YOU KNOW?

As well as the elite event, there will be a ‘Heroes Championship’ featuring the NY and Philadelphia Fire Departments, the NYPD and Jersey State Troopers.

SEVENS GALLERY

The top snaps from a glorious return for the Hong Kong Sevens

Smoke clears
Aussies run out

Always popular
Fiji fans

Competing in the air
A Black Ferns lineout

Over the top
France v HK

Up for it
Japan v Australia

Happy flock
An ovine look

SEVENS FACT

This year’s two Rugby Europe Championship legs will be held in the Algarve (9-11 June) and Hamburg (7-9 July) – the first leg in Germany since 2009. Poland’s women (right) and Spain’s men are reigning champions.

PICS Getty Images

GRASS ROOTS

Power burst
No 8 Tom Spencer breaks away v Hope Valley

PIC Michael Austin

AMBER VALLEY

A new era beckons for this Derbyshire club near Alfreton. Founded in 1967, Amber Valley have played at Pye Bridge for 40 years but are on the move after selling their ground for housing to a builder, who's providing equivalent facilities two miles away at Riddings. Club stalwart Tom Uniacke said: "We've close ties with Riddings Cricket Club. We play them at rugby and cricket."

Going back 25 years, Valley ran five men's sides. Now they field two with the firsts, led by Jack Greasley, playing in C3 Midlands East (N) West. They also run a vets and a women's XV. Up to 50 mini-juniors take the field on Sundays.

All five coaches are former Valley players, headed by James Woodthorpe with Steve Grainger, Lee Chapman, Uniacke and Gareth Pilkington in support. Uniacke, a Notts, Lincs & Derbyshire referee, appeared at scrum-half aged 59 last October and plans to resume playing after recovering from knee surgery.

KEAY TO SUCCESS It's welcome back as DoR to Alex Keay from **Preston Grasshoppers**. He had stabilised the club as a competitive force in National Two North before guiding Durham University to five BUCS Championship titles from 2010 onwards. A former Saracens captain, he rejoined 'Hoppers on a two-and-a-half-year contract.

"Alex has a fantastic track record," said chairman of rugby Mike Bailey. "His knowledge and experience will be invaluable to the squad and the club."

SEEN AND HEARD In contrast, **Hull** have made a poignant return to Two North after one season in National One. On a brighter note, co-captain and centre Ali Heard completed 200 appearances as the campaign drew to a close.

It was an emotional day for Heard, who watched a montage of video messages from past and present team-mates, backroom staff and his family. He said: "I didn't think I would play so many times for the club and it means a lot to reach 200."

SPECIAL MEMORIES Gareth Lewis, a well-respected coach and DoR, has stepped down from Two North club **Huddersfield** after more than a decade, initially as a flanker. He said: "I've been incredibly proud of leading my home-town club. I will treasure the special bonds and friendships."

Chair of rugby Paul Sharrock added: "Under Gareth's stewardship, we were unbeaten in the 2016-17 National Three North season and he helped to cement our Two North position. His 250 games with the club are a fantastic achievement."

ENDING ON A HIGH Marcus Noye may have had a nostalgic tear in his eye after leaving his role as the **Rams** social rugby manager. But he was a happy man as two of 'his' three teams, Rams III, the Centaurs and the fourth XV, known as the Dragon's Teeth, won their respective Berks, Bucks & Oxon league titles.

Noye, ex-Army and a former police officer, joined the Reading-based club 18 years ago, has spent a decade running the fourths and added the thirds and fifths to his 'portfolio' in the past three seasons.

"We've played some entertaining rugby," he said. "We're building a club and a product and have pushed the idea of the Centaurs being a development squad. There are lads aged 18 and 19 playing at an outstanding level."

SHORT PASS

Harborne fell just short of winning C2 Midlands West North but were promoted as runners-up after beating Bridgnorth Bulls 31-10. Coach Jon Arch said: "It's special for us. A lot of players go through their entire career without going up to a higher league. They absolutely deserved it."

HANGING HIS BOOTS UP **Thornbury** said farewell to former Moseley and Llanelli scrum-half Jak Evans, who has retired after making 189 first-team appearances dating back to 2010. One of the club's finest players, he led the side in his final match that ended in a 35-24 defeat by Newent in R2 Severn.

Kudos, too, for No 8 Lloyd Duke, who played his 250th game for **Launceston** in their 39-20 loss to Camborne in R1 South-West. He was presented with a framed shirt after the match.

NEW ROLE Ciaran Smyth has been an outstanding **Bournemouth** flanker in his two seasons since moving from National League club Barnes. Big tackles and winning turnovers were the name of his game. He's now retired from playing but the Irishman's input will be invaluable next season in a new position as a senior coach for the R1 South Central side.

The same applies to Northampton hooker Mikey Haywood. He featured in 269 matches for Saints but is returning to his roots at **Colchester**, where he began his playing days. He is joining the staff at St Joseph's College in Ipswich and will coach Colchester's forwards.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL **Shelford**, another R1 South-East club, have appointed Will Cotterill as director of operations and head coach with immediate effect. He joined them in 2019 as the rugby development officer before becoming the DoR in January 2020 and being influential in their second-place league finish this spring.

GOLDEN YEARS **Olney** reached a significant landmark in the club's history when celebrating 50 years of mini-junior rugby. They acknowledged the achievement when past and present players from the squads formed a guard of honour before the first team beat Lutterworth 30-26 in R2 East Midlands.

Olney were among the pioneering English clubs that embraced the game at that level and nowadays more than 400 boys and girls from six to 16 train and play there in the time-honoured way on Sunday mornings.

FUTURE-PROOFING **Cannock**'s 75th anniversary year has inspired a drive to safeguard the club for future generations. They run age groups from U6 to U18 at their ground in Staffordshire, but their team rugby begins at U10 level and the squad had only ten players at the last count.

Mitchell Beach, who runs the section, said that age group often marks the stage when youngsters decide whether the game is for them. He added: “We want to catch players young and encourage them to play from being juniors to seniors.”

In the past season, Cannock’s first-team finished seventh in the ten-club C3 Midlands West (North).

BEST FOOT FORWARD National One club **Cinderford** have added a new meaning to boots being made for walking. ‘The Boot Tribe’ have swung into action to help underprivileged groups in Africa, where many are playing rugby barefoot and some players have never owned a pair of boots.

Cinderford set a goal of sending 250 pairs of old rugby footwear and trainers to the Zambia Rugby Union in June and another 300 pairs to Zimbabwe for schools and clubs in August.

Mark Scott, a past player at National Two East club **North Walsham**, is heading to Malawi in June to volunteer for the Bhubesi Pride Foundation. He’s raising money for the charity and assisting their community programme by coaching sports, assisting teachers and supporting sessions at local rugby clubs.

SHORT PASS

Barnes minis are in their 15th year and will have a ‘birthday bash’ on 13 May. It all began when five dads and 25 kids turned up on a blustery afternoon in 2008. Thriving mini-junior and colts sections have developed at the National Two East club from those tentative beginnings.

FRENCH CONNECTION John Spencer, the former **Wharfedale**, **Headingley**, England and Lions centre, has achieved many accolades but his latest honour was an unusual one, bestowed by France head coach Fabien Galthié. It was on the eve of the Six Nations match against England at Twickenham.

Spencer and his wife Amanda were invited to join the French squad in their team room at the Lensbury Club. They were introduced to the players and Spencer presented each one with their match shirt. On the screen was a picture of him playing alongside the late David Duckham, his great friend. Amanda said: “It was very emotional to see.”

GOING STRONG Scrum-half Gareth Bladen has marked 30 years as a **Bridgnorth** player with 400 first-team appearances and counting. His debut at that level was 17 years ago and, now aged 37, he has scored more than a hundred tries for the R1 Midlands side.

Dab hand
Scrum-half Luke Jones passes v Chew Valley

PIC Peter Edmondson

OLD CENTRALIANS

There’s a sad twist to the story of Gloucester-based Cents being relegated from R1 South-West. DoR Martin Townsend said: “We received a draft copy of the 2022-23 set-up in March last year and were placed in a Midlands league. Two months later we were put back into the South-West. I had thought the days of four-hour coach journeys to Cornwall were over, recruited on that basis and retained players who’d intended to leave because of excess travelling. A lot have young families and work on Saturday mornings, so we were unable to select from a full squad. We lost five games by two points.”

Cents began as an old boys club from Central Technology School in 1937. Led by fly-half Harry Preece, they have Rob Winchle, ex-Cinderford, as head player-coach. Looking back, Cents also nurtured hooker Mike Nicholls, who captained Gloucester to glory in the 1972 John Player Cup final.

Fly-half Olly Beech, a former **Silhillians** captain, has retired from playing for the R2 North Midlands club after stalwart service that was interrupted for several years by a broken leg. He said: “I’ve loved every bit of this Sils journey and made great memories with some top blokes.”

DASHING DUO Charity begins at home at **Stewarts & Lloyds**, the Corby-based C2 Midlands East (South) club. Their lock Alden Marshall and wing Nathan Hand have raised £2,645 to improve the clubhouse and make it more accessible for the wider community. To achieve their aim, the pair ran 10km each day for a month and 20km on the final day. They covered 291km in 27 hours 33 minutes.

Hand said: “I’m pleased with the amount and happy we did it together as mates.” Marshall said: “I’ve been with S&L almost 20 years and it’s the family spirit that makes the club so special.”

LIGHTING THE WAY **Torquay Athletic**, of C2 Devon, are seeking financial help to acquire mobile floodlights. With a growing number of senior and junior players joining the club, the lit areas of the pitch at the Recreation Ground are in heavy use. Their target is £4,788 to cover the cost of eight floodlights.

Amersham & Chiltern celebrated after beating Buckingham 55-3 in the Buckinghamshire U15 Cup final, while **Farnham** finished the season with their highest placing in league history when being runners-up in R2 South-East.

JAKE’S PROGRESS **Baildon**, a top-three team in C2 Yorkshire for most of the season, achieved the highest finish in their history.

Head coach Jake Duxbury said: “We were second from bottom of the league below when I took over in 2019. The progress has been exceptional in the past two campaigns. Early on, we had a social gathering as a team and only 11 players attended. At our most recent one there were 40. It just shows how the club has moved forward.”

SADLY MISSED **London Welsh** are mourning former minis and youth coach John James, who has died aged 63. He was coached by the great Gareth Edwards when playing for Cardiff Schools, appeared for the Army at scrum-half and moved to London in 1987. A major supporter of Wales rugby, his son Owain was selected for England at U16 and U18 level.

WHY GLASGOW WILL BRING VERVE TO THE PLAY-OFFS

Franco Smith's Warriors are playing fearless rugby, says **Sean Holley**

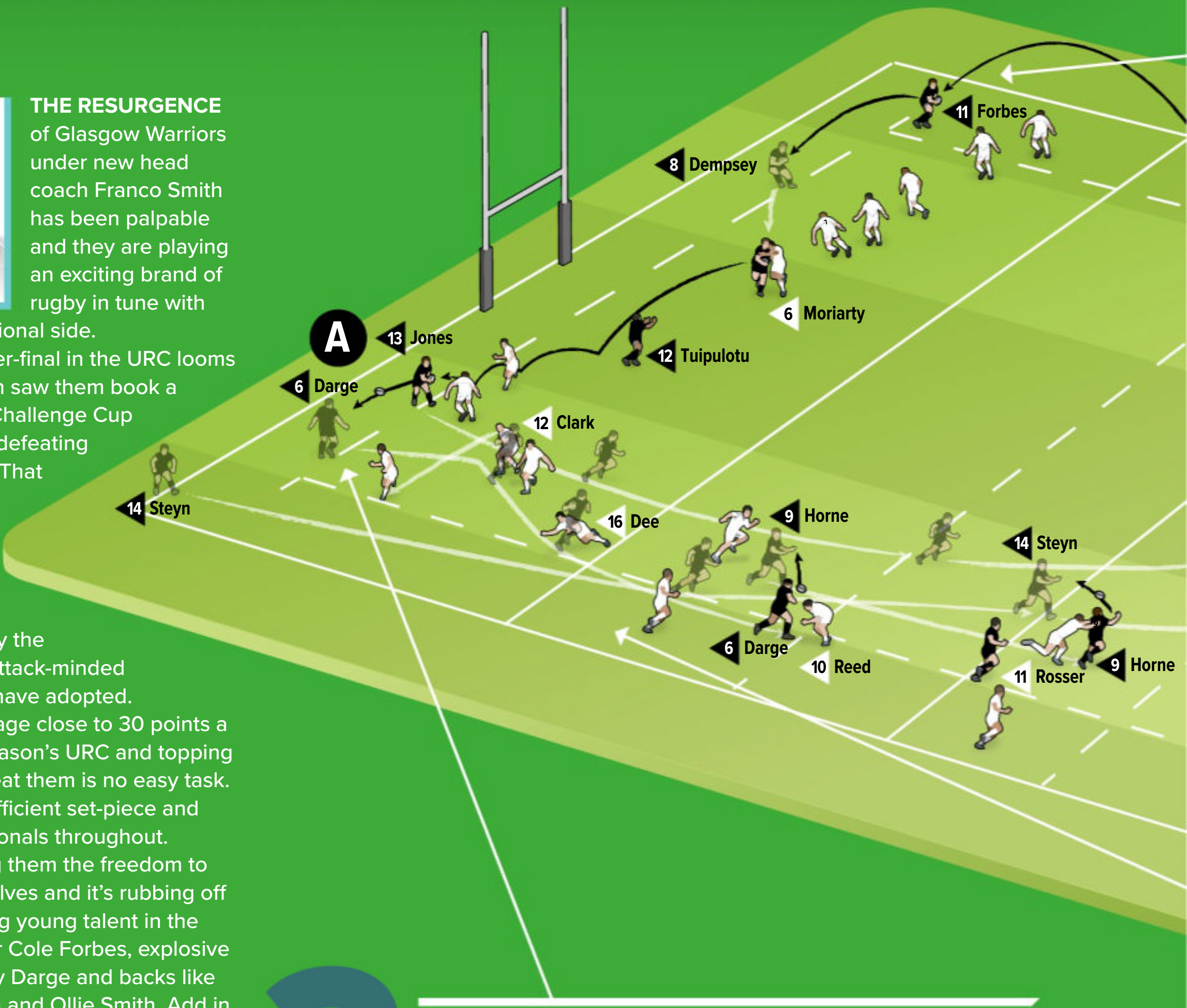
THE RESURGENCE of Glasgow Warriors under new head coach Franco Smith has been palpable and they are playing an exciting brand of rugby in tune with the Scottish national side.

A home quarter-final in the URC looms while last month saw them book a first European Challenge Cup semi-final after defeating Emirates Lions. That win followed a 73-33 rout of Dragons in which they scored 11 tries – you can't deny the free spirit and attack-minded approach they have adopted.

Glasgow average close to 30 points a match in this season's URC and topping that figure to beat them is no easy task. They have an efficient set-piece and quality internationals throughout.

Smith is giving them the freedom to express themselves and it's rubbing off on some exciting young talent in the shape of winger Cole Forbes, explosive back-rower Rory Darge and backs like Ross Thompson and Ollie Smith. Add in some overseas flavour with the likes of prop Lucio Sordoni, flanker Sione Vailanu and outside-half Domingo Miotti and you have a pretty tasty recipe.

One of the Warriors' tries against the Dragons epitomises their enthusiasm to attack. Having just passed the 60-point mark with a length-of-the-field try finished by Forbes, their insatiable appetite to score tries saw them repeat the feat from the next restart, this time Huw Jones rounding off a 90m effort to the delight of the home fans. I've taken a closer look at that sensational try…



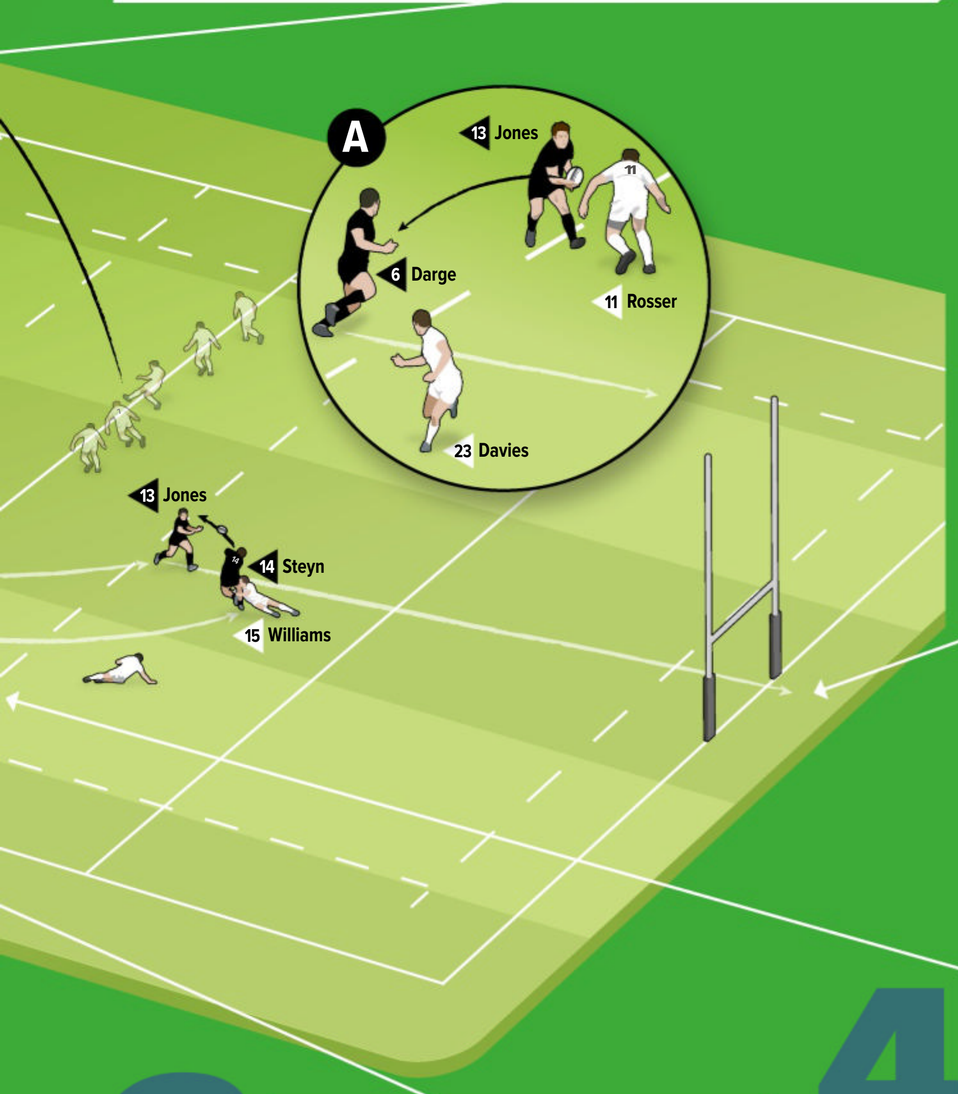
2

THE BREAK. The difficult bouncing ball falls to the feet of Jones, a metre from his own try-line. Even under such pressure, he is composed and collects the ball low down in two hands. Realising he has two defenders, Jared Rosser and Ioan Davies, descending upon him, he quickly straightens with ball in two hands, uses a quick bit of footwork – showing the ball in the process – and fixes both defenders. He's acutely aware he has flanker Rory Darge on his outside and, with Davies hedging his bets with Kyle Steyn outside Darge, Jones passes to Darge (see inset illustration), who has squared his run to hit the hole between the two defenders.

Coaching Points Players enjoy being tested. Make a 10m wide by 5m long grid and create a 2 v 2. Feed the ball to one attacker and encourage that player to square up, use footwork and attack between the two defenders. If the player can make it through the 5m depth, even if tackled then score it as a success. Eventually both defenders will commit to the ball-carrier, allowing him to pass to his fellow attacker.

1

THE AMBITION. Wing Cole Forbes catches a deep restart and passes infield to Jack Dempsey. The No 8 runs wide of the Dragons chasers, noticing a dog-leg in the kick chase. As Dempsey is tackled by Ross Moriarty, he attempts an audacious one-handed offload whilst off balance meant for Sione Tuipulotu. The timing of the centre’s run is just too flat and the ball ricochets off his shoulder, bouncing back in the direction of Huw Jones. **Coaching Points** Although inaccurate, Dempsey’s offload shows Glasgow’s intent. If as a coach you instil an offloading mentality then it has to be taught correctly. Controlling the tackle contact is important. Practise 1 v 1 with manufactured tackle situations with the tackler going low and trying to manipulate the ball-carrier. Add a support player, calling for the ball and running onto the offload from deep. Carriers need to practise winning the collision, freeing their hands and safely offloading. Get players to grapple in a fairly stationary position and try different offloads with either one or both hands to get a feel of the weight and control of the delivery.



3

THE FEND. Darge bursts through the gap and switches the ball to his right hand to fend off Rosser. Centre Max Clark and then hooker Elliot Dee also try desperately to get to the flanker but again Darge’s powerful fend comes into play and he speeds away. **Coaching Points** Holding a ball to the chest with one hand, and swapping hands whilst leaving the ball on the chest, is a good start point here. Add a defender with a contact shield held at chest height, approaching from the side to encourage a fend and the placement of the hand. Move this on at walking pace, jogging and eventually to receiving a pass, transferring the ball and fending.

4

THE OFFLOAD. Darge approaches Glasgow’s 10m line at full speed but Dragons fly-half Will Reed, covering in the backfield, lines him up. Darge runs straight at Reed, puts the ball back into both hands and subtly pumps the ball as if to pass, in order to commit Reed. Darge is aware he has support and times his pass inside to scrum-half George Horne to perfection.

Horne realises that the speedy Rosser has tracked back and is about to catch him from behind. Steyn has followed the ball and arced infield to get on Horne’s left. As he’s tackled, Horne makes a beautiful one-handed pass inside to Steyn – a lofted delivery that has just enough weight for the wing to run onto and grasp.

5

THE FINISH. Steyn sees Jordan Williams, the Dragons’ last line of defence, hurtling across. He runs infield towards the full-back’s inside shoulder and wrongfoots him enough to half get past him. Jones, the main instigator earlier in the piece, has continued his run in support. He cleverly runs infield even before Steyn has received the ball. Steyn delivers on cue as he dives through Williams’s effort and executes the offload to Jones, who runs in to score under the posts. **Coaching Points** When I was coaching, we’d use the phrase ‘Control of Loose Play’ to promote this kind of attacking rugby. Channel work is the best way to encourage this. A 5m by 20m channel with defenders placed in 5m depths can simulate the final passages of Glasgow’s try against the Dragons. A coach can manufacture the nature of the defenders (eg, wear a tackle suit/live defender). Put a defender on their knees so they must tackle low to promote offloads.

Be creative. Make the end of the channel a try-line and run groups of three or four attackers through this channel where they have to hold their depth of support and communicate from behind. The carriers must create space by stepping, swerving, slowing foot speed – all things evident in Jones’s try.

WHO IS SEAN HOLLEY?

A former Ospreys and Bristol coach who has also worked with Wales and is now a TV analyst

ILLUSTRATION Artlife

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING THIS MONTH...

FEAST LIKE TOP ATHLETES

1 MOVE

I LOOK at different angles to make sure food fits players' needs, *writes performance chef Will Carvalho*. After a game we aim at refuelling with different components. I'm very keen on using themed menus and never repeat foods, so the challenge is to find what I need from the ingredients. It's about making it interesting but always changing. The only thing that repeats on my menu is low-sugar baked beans. I'm a big believer in quality, seasonality, surprise.

In the week the menu should have the exact fuel for the exact amount of training, though it changes for the captain's run, so we are building up for the game. The day after we aim high regarding carbs but also for polyphenol foods (red fruits, etc).

For post match, we have come up with some recipes that include a home-made puffed rice bar with dates, raisins and honey, plus a few things we will keep secret!

> **"I'm a big believer in quality, seasonality and surprise"**

These help straightaway to get some glycogen back into your system, but we also have options that will get some carbs back in the body. This has an impact because some players can't eat straightaway – most because of the collisions sustained during a game – so I can make the food approach more soft and drinkable. Others are fine with solid food with the same objective. Protein is obviously included and we always go for lighter options to ease digestion.

I'm also a fan of the FODMAP diet (short-chain carbohydrates). It can help massively knowing how your body reacts to certain foods, so you have fewer issues with the main engine (guts).

A mouthful
Jonny Hill

Q

If you plan around your training intensities and playing, is it best to keep food prep basic and constantly repeat?

A

My menus always have three mains objectives, *writes Will Carvalho.* Looking after players in full activity (playing), players in rehab (during various steps of their recovery) and those not playing but still training at 100% (who will therefore lack match-day intensity).

My week menu planning has had French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Japanese, Argentinian, Canadian and Portuguese dishes, where I take what I need and it makes it fun.

My golden rule? Oat porridge is the king in the morning. Infuse it with something different, have add-ons, and players will love it.

WORDS Alan Dymock. **PICS** Getty Images

2 FEED

OVERNIGHT OATS

SINGLE SERVING

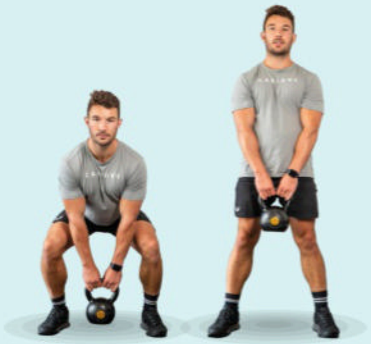
1 Mix together your batch of oats, the almond drink, chia seeds and cinnamon. Place it all in a jar with a lid on and pop it in the fridge overnight.

2 In the morning, top your oat mixture with some fresh chopped banana and a layer of the the pecans to serve. You can always add more cinnamon, too.

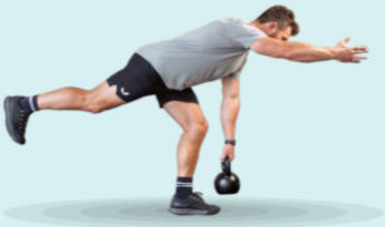
- 75g oats
- 240ml unsweetened almond drink
- 2 teaspoons chia seeds
- 1 pinch cinnamon
- 1 small banana, peeled and chopped
- 6-8 whole pecans

3 TRAIN STEPS TO SUCCESS

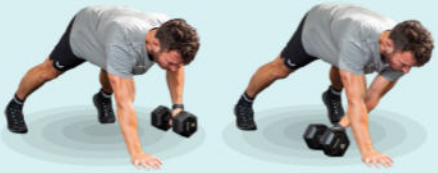
Unsure what to do with kettlebells and dumb-bells? Try these three moves, courtesy of Milo & The Bull



1 Sumo deadlift
// 3 x 6 REPS
Feet wider than shoulder-width, bend at the hips and lower to grab bell. Drive heels through foot to stand, back flat.



2 SL Romanian deadlift
// 3 x 6 REPS
Hold the bell by your side, overhand. Lift one leg off the ground, moving foot behind with back, and lean forward. Return.



3 Plank pull-through
// 3 x 6 REPS EACH SIDE
In a plank position with a dumb-bell on floor, grab with outside arm and pull across to other side of body, keeping core engaged. Reset, use other arm.

HOW TO DEFEND IN THE BACKFIELD

Newcastle Falcons' **Ben Stevenson** explains the art of defending at the back

"The closer you are to the opposition line, the more likely you'll be to drop further back in terms of depth. This changes depending on your opponents. Some teams like to be competitive and shorter with their kicks, so against those teams you can't afford to drop deep, otherwise they'll have a free catch."

"Don't be nervous about joining the line when you're attacking. If you lose the ball, you'll be able to recover as a team and defend. If you don't attack, you'll struggle to score as you'd be playing as if you were a man down."

"Generally elite teams don't use the pendulum defence, although you will often see it used when defending a set-piece. Instead, teams typically use a two-man backfield with the fly-half and full-back defending deep."

"You need to constantly communicate with the other backfield players. It helps to receive communication about whether the kick is competitive or not, so you know whether to jump in the air to catch it or to stay on the ground. Then once you catch the ball, it helps when the other backfield players tell you what to do, such as run open, pass or kick."

INTERVIEW Sam Larner. **PIC** Getty Images

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★STAR LETTER★

It's not all bad news

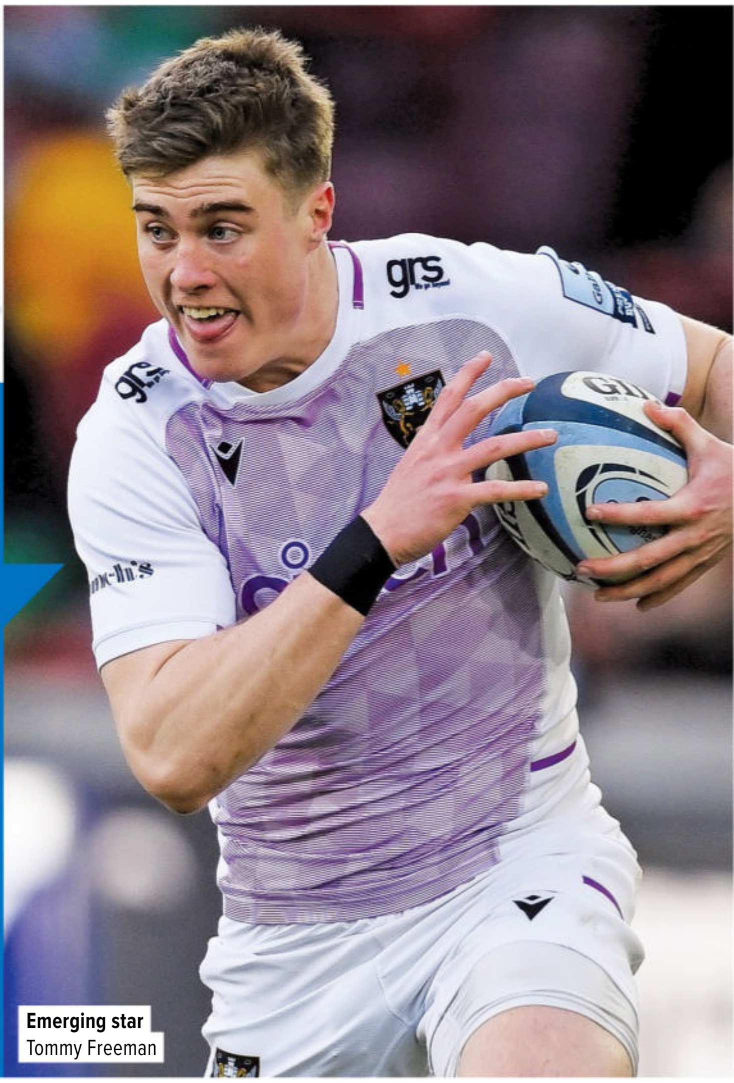
Rugby headlines have been dominated for some time by problems impacting our sport. While we cannot close our eyes to the financial issues many clubs face, the expected exodus of top players chasing higher salaries abroad or the serious issues of player health and welfare, we also need to focus on what is good in the game.

We've recently seen one of the most entertaining Six Nations for years, and two northern hemisphere teams go to the World Cup with a real chance of winning it.

In addition, the Premiership has provided free-flowing matches in which the likes of Josh Hodge (Exeter) and Tommy Freeman (Northampton), to mention only two of a good crop of youngsters, are coming through.

While Test rugby is the sport's shop window, this doesn't prohibit those further down the ladder, both individually and collectively, working to promote and develop the game.

Rob Minto, Cambridgeshire



Emerging star
Tommy Freeman

In defence of TikTok

Re your Rugby Rant about TikTok being a Women's Six Nations sponsor (*May issue*): It's hard to agree that TikTok is a bad choice. I understand concerns about privacy, but rugby supporters are not obliged to install their app or create an account to watch the championship.

There are other sponsorship examples in sport that are more questionable. What does high-processed food from McDonald's have in common with sport? The same with Coca-Cola. Do we need sugary drinks to enjoy the game?

TikTok are targeting a young audience to promote women's rugby and it works.

Mikolaj Baj, Anstey, Leicestershire

Dropping a clanger

Jack Nowell got in hot water for a tweet but he merely articulated what the rest of us thought. Karl Dickson's decision to send off Exeter's Olly Woodburn – a second yellow card – and award Leicester a penalty try was bewildering. Woodburn tried to tackle Chris Ashton before the try-line and made minimal, and legal, contact.

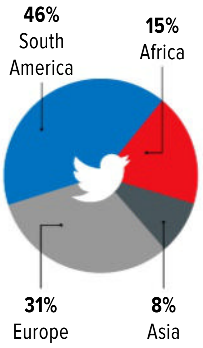
Dickson should be stood down for such ineptitude. And why didn't TMO Andrew Jackson and the assistant refs step in to avert such a farcical decision?

Mike Tullis, Beaconsfield, Bucks

Confused
Olly Woodburn is sent off at Leicester

THE RW POLL

Where should the 2035 World Cup be held? Here's how you voted...



Tier Two boycott?

The proposed World League would block Tier Two sides like Georgia from meaningful games v Tier One sides until at least 2030. It would lock out the USA – not great preparation for the host nation of the 2031 World Cup.

You wonder what World Rugby are thinking. If this League goes ahead, Tier Two sides should threaten to pull out of the 2023 World Cup in protest.

Jonny Lewis, Oakham, Rutland

A crying shame

The proposed international nations league will see the sad end of both Tier One v Tier Two Tests outside of a World Cup and the traditional three-match Test

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

Problem area? Scrums get it in the neck from our readers

series between countries. Matches such as Spain v Argentina this August should be cherished and celebrated for their uniqueness in an otherwise repetitive international calendar.

Greg Armstrong, Telford, Shropshire

They think it's all over...

As a steward at Cornish Pirates, I was carrying out duties at our home match against Caldy. Clashing with the Exeter v Montpellier match, I set my Sky Q to record both the BT and ITV coverage.

As we know, this amazing match went to extra time, so imagine my dismay that both recordings stopped before the end! I'm sure some smart techies will be able to explain the reasons for this, but for me it was very disappointing.

Martin Davis, Penzance, Cornwall

RW says: We sympathise, Martin, we too have been caught out like this!

Let's create space

Here are some immediate changes to make to the game:

1. Maximum two subs on the bench.
2. Make more front-row players available for 2nd/3rd/4th teams.
3. Players more likely to have to play the full 80 minutes, so lose some bulk to be able to run around for longer.
4. As players fatigue, games open up and become more entertaining.

What are the reasons NOT to do this?

Greg Noble, Sheffield, South Yorkshire

Scrap the scrum resets

Re suggested new laws: I'd get rid of reset scrums and scrum penalties. Resets take forever and add nothing to the game. Kickable midfield scrum pens are too much of a reward for an often minor scrum infringement.

And sometimes scrum pens are pretty arbitrary. If a scrum collapses, goes up or if the ref blows for another reason, give a free-kick to the attacking side. Scrums should not be penalty generators.

Matt Stevens, via Facebook

Simple solution

If the ball is available in the scrum, the attacking team must play the ball. If they don't, award a free-kick to the opposition. This will reduce repeated scrums and scrum penalties, and increase the ball in play time.

Rukus du Plessis, via Facebook

Silly talk, Simon!

Simon Middleton's comment about allowing women to take conversions from nearer the posts is a bit weird.

His regular goal-kicker (Emily Scarratt), who has excellent percentages, is injured, so alternative players are kicking and have just not been of the same standard. To consider changing the laws because of this is silly.

David Fielding, via Facebook

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Published monthly by Future Publishing Limited.
Rugby World incorporates Rugby Post.

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Special thanks to Anne Levenard, Oli Shapley, Ste Thomas at RPA, Richard McElwee at Rugby Players Ireland, Natasha Marks from Octagon, Grace Murray from YMU, Terry Sands, Emily Liles, Stuart Woodhouse at King's School, Parramatta, Verity Williams.

No thanks to Late nights, packing, 60th birthdays.

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One year (12 issues) includes P&P – UK £66; Europe and Eire: €91.26; USA $149.75; Rest of world £97.75.
Back issues www.magazinesdirect.com or call +44(0)330 333 1113
Printed by Walstead UK Limited.
Distributed by Marketforce, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London, W2 6JR. www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0330 390 7498

***Rugby World* has an audited readership of 172,000 * readers per issue**. * Source: PAMCo 2020

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THE SECRET PLAYER

Our former pro provides a unique insight into the game

"With money on the table, hopes and dreams quickly switch"

I'VE NEVER liked the international qualification regulations that rugby uses.

Three years to become a naturalised player was a joke. Now it's five. And as a Test player, I probably missed out on caps because of a player or two who were brought over as the great white hope for my country. They went on to get four or five caps each and never produced anything of note. And then they all went home, back to their native country at the end of their careers.

They just had a dabble at representing a country that I grew up dying to represent. I think it's a joke and I've always thought so.

There was a story in France recently about Lyon trying to sign a 17-year-old centre who had played for Australia U18s. And another story on Montpellier going for another Aussie teenager, a tighthead, who was already 125kg. This is professionalism today. I get that. But it feels like the age profile is trending younger.

So for me, the move to five years of residency to represent a country you weren't born or educated in just isn't enough. These two boys will be 23 if they go on to qualify for France. But this isn't a case of moving around the world because of a family – it's business. This is mining of another nation's resources.

I'll be stunned if these kids ever had any hopes or dreams of playing for France. But it feels like as soon as money comes on the table, hopes and dreams are very quickly switched. Just look at the regulation allowing players to change allegiance despite already being capped, if they have served a three-year stand-down period and have a 'credible' link to another country.

I'm sure Jack Dempsey felt he had a big point to prove when pulling on a Scotland jersey after so many caps for Australia. Then the No 8 made his debut against the Wallabies – the team he had supported since he was a kid. For me, this makes a mockery of the system.

I've also seen players like Devin Toner missing out on the World Cup in 2019 for Jean Kleyn, which I thought was scandalous considering how much he has done for Ireland. Nobody says anything because it's not seen as politically correct to speak out, but huge numbers of players absolutely hate it.

One-time Wallaby
No 8 Jack Dempsey

I understand the initial drive to take a few players back to Tonga and Samoa, or allow second- or third-generation stars to build them up a bit. I think that's terrific. But when it comes to the other end of the spectrum, such as with Scotland and all the players they've had playing for them in the past few seasons, it's bizarre. Albeit for me to suggest this is also short termism, when Scotland's age-grade teams are totally bombing every year.

You can't blame pro players for making moves, of course. They're looking to get ahead in life, have a bit of experience and use rugby as an adventure – and we all want that. But there's a bit of falseness about the quick affinity with other nations. If someone in the Ireland back-line had a better offer from Wales, or if a club in England offered them the same money, would they have gone to the highest bidder? Careers can look totally different.

So is five years enough? I don't think so. Should it be six or even seven? I don't know.

We could cut it another way and say players have to move to a country at a younger age to be considered eligible as a resident, yet we're already seeing clubs snap up younger and younger players. Do we then start an arms race for what are ostensibly children? It's so tough.

Picking home-grown players should be seen as a badge of honour. Creating talent is something to shout about. Having the sexiest offers on the table for someone else's natural resources just doesn't feel right.

In 2023 the sad truth is most of us don't know how to protect the heritage of our countries while they pilfer talent from other nations, blocking the path of home-grown kids who genuinely dream of wearing the jersey. RW

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